

A LION AMONG THE LADIES BY PHILIP GASKELL



"A lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing;
for there is not a more fearful wild fowl than your
lion living."—*Midsummer Night's Dream.*

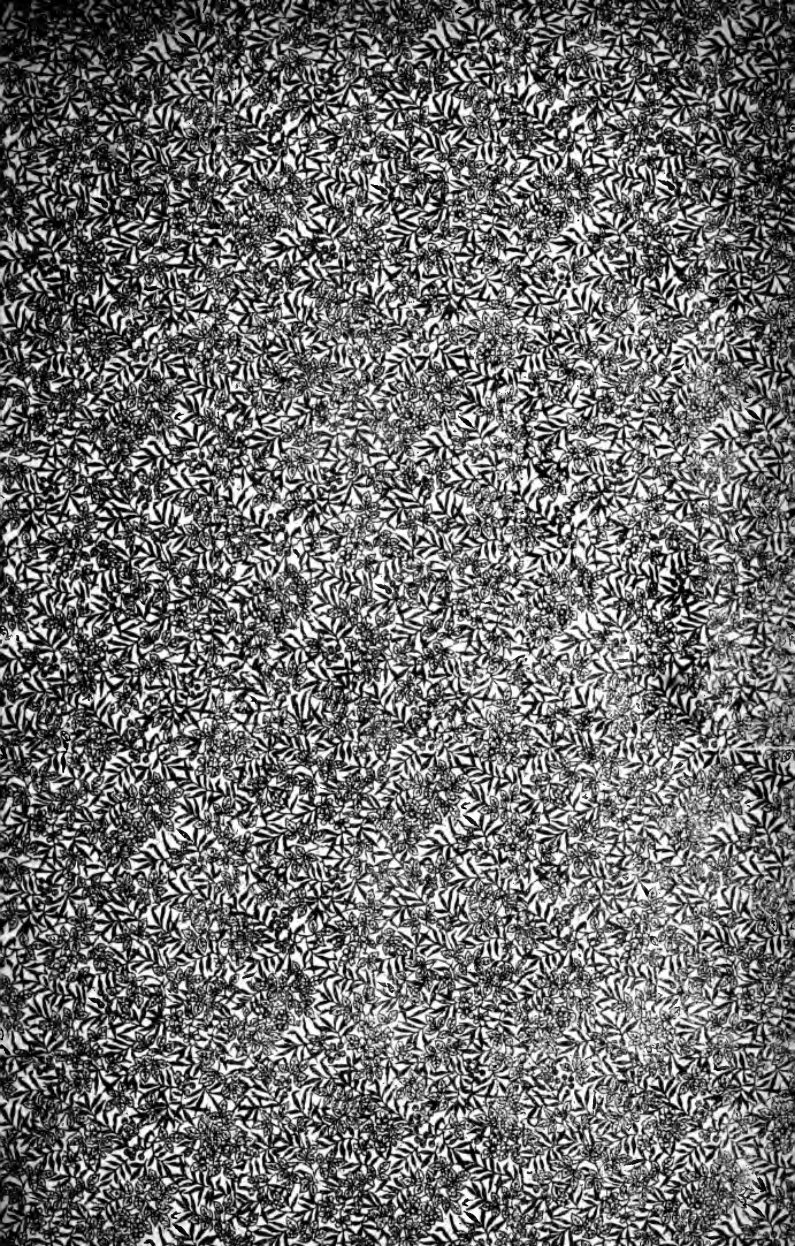


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A NOVEL.

BY

PHILIP GASKELL,

AUTHOR OF "THE SENIOR MAJOR," ETC.

"A lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing ; for there
is not a more fearful wild fowl than your lion living."

Midsummer Night's Dream.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A LION AMONG THE LADIES.



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CHAPTER I.

MAY DURANT MEETS WITH APPROVAL.

THE announcement of Captain Elphinstone's marriage engagement was received on nearly all sides by marks of disapprobation. His choice of an obscure country girl—one who had only a certain amount of good looks to recommend her—was considered by the com-

munity at large as something approaching to an offence in regard to those who, having failed to draw the matrimonial prize, had found themselves hopelessly distanced by an outsider. If Captain Elphinstone's affianced wife had been endowed with either rank, or high standing in the world of fashion, the affront would doubtless have been less keenly felt; but, as matters stood, Miss Durant could not, for the present, at least, hope to be pardoned for the success which she had all unconsciously achieved.

It is the month of July—the weather is intensely hot, and Mrs Durant, who is still weak, and easily effected by atmospheric changes, is thankful for her escape from the small rooms and stuffy prettiness of the Shanty's circumscribed and overfilled space. Ivy Combe, the airy

cottage in which she and Helen have—thanks to Captain Elphinstone's exertions—found a refuge, did indeed, on all accounts, strike the new-comers in the light of a blessed change. It was so still, so peaceful, and the honeysuckles which clustered round the porch sent forth a perfume that was as the breath of heaven, when compared with the odour of stale *pot-pourri* and pungent smelling-*sachets* which clung round the furniture of the Shanty. This hour is a witching one, for the stillness of night is beginning to steal softly over the senses, and only a faint rustling of the leaves, as some restless bird stirs upon its perch, breaks in upon the silence which, to lovers, is so highly prized a boon. Rowley Elphinstone and the girl in whom he every hour discovers—as is the wont of woman-wor-

shippers, some fresh and gracious gift, are seated side by side in the rustic porch. The quiet around them is so profound, that Helen's lover, whose heart is beating wildly within his breast, is half afraid that his shy and gentle sweetheart will hear, and feel alarmed by, the fierce throbs which are causing his breath to come thick and laboured from his lungs. Helen, although she has passed her twentieth year, and is beginning to understand what woman's love may mean, is as ignorant as a child of the very existence of the waves of passion which surge so tumultuously (especially in such hours as those which are passing now) in the breast of a man over whom love has for the moment gained the mastery; there is something almost alarming to Elphinstone in the death-like stillness by which he is encom-

passed. His fear lest he should be involuntarily driven to breathe into the loved one's ear far warmer words than any to which she had as yet listened is great, he therefore breaks the spell by saying irrelevantly, and in a voice that sounds curiously tremulous,—

“Tell me something more, darling, about your sister. I am so glad that she is coming to join us here. She must have missed you sorely in that dull Cornish home. But I think you told me that May—what a pretty, spring-like name it is—”

“Yes, but it is not really hers,” Helen, in her low murmuring tones rejoins. “She was christened Mary, and I hardly know when the name was converted into May. Perhaps it was because she is herself so like a blossom of the

Spring. When you see her, you will understand ; she is so bright—so pretty.”

“Too bright and too pretty, I feel sure, to waste her sweetness in the desert air of Cornwall,” put in Rowley, who, being still under the influence of the atmosphere and the hour, was, as it were, talking for talking’s sake. “I wish, my sweet one,” he added, and his arm, as he spoke the tender words, stole round the loved one’s waist, “that you could persuade your mother to make this charming old place her home. As long as we live, my Nellie, it will be associated with the happiest moments of our lives—I, at least,” he continued, drawing a long breath, which sounded to Helen’s ears too much akin to a sigh, “shall never forget the happy week which I have passed with

you amongst the trees and flowers here."

"And do you think," she, half reproachfully, asked, "that my memory of this time will be shorter than yours? Ah, no! I shall always dearly love Ivy Combe. My only fear has been that I have been *too* happy. And without May, moreover, which is so strange. Dear little May! She is better than I am,—much less selfish. She could not have forgotten, as I have done, the contrast—the difference between our lives."

"Darling, she will understand many things better," Rowley said tenderly, "when she has learned what it is to love and to be loved;" and as the word escaped his lips, the spell of close proximity, and the influence of the sweet

warm summer night, was again at work, and he gathered, with a close and passionate pressure, the now half-frightened girl to his wildly-beating heart.

It was very vague and indistinct, that sudden fear of hers which caused her to draw herself from her lover's embrace, and to say, in a voice the quaver in which at once recalled him to his senses,—

“It is growing very late, I fear, and mother will lie awake for me to say good-night. Let us go in doors.” And rising as she spoke, she led the way into the house.

When, two days after this trifling episode, Mary Durant arrived at Ivy Combe, her brother-in-law elect was the first to pronounce her “charming.”

Helen, whose respect for his opinions was unbounded—expressed in no measured terms her delight that the sister whom she so dearly loved, should have obtained favour in his sight.

“I am so glad you think her nice,” she said to her lover, as he, standing at the open window by her side, watched with her the pretty, girlish form which, flitting about like some gay butterfly among the flowers, turned ever and anon her graceful head with something of a coquettish glance towards those whose eyes were fixed admiringly upon her movements. “She is so glad, dear child,” continued Helen, “to be again with me and mother, and yet she has never complained,—never written to us that she was wearied to death of the Vicarage, in which we were so cruel as to

leave her. Mr Everett is a good man, and his wife is a perfect pattern of what a Vicaress ought to be ; but I can understand now how terribly May must have been bored with the dull routine of life under their roof."

A laugh—light but suggestive—broke, as he listened, from the lips of Rowley Elphinstone. From the little that he had as yet seen of May, he was quite ready to endorse the belief which Helen had just expressed ; for charming, as well as exquisitely pretty, as he acknowledged the sister of his own pure love to be, he detected, with the eye of experience, certain dangerous potentialities for mischief in the girl, to whom he could not, when speaking of her to Nellie, deny the sweetly-sounding praise of being "very nice."

Meanwhile May, for by her pet name we prefer to call her, repaid with interest the encomiums which Rowley Elphinstone bestowed upon her. He belonged in every way to a type of man of which this country-raised girl possessed not the very faintest previous knowledge; and the wonder with which she at first regarded him was almost equal to her admiration. Helen's written descriptions of the friend who had acted the part of special Providence for herself and her family, had by no means prepared the younger sister for the reality which awaited her, nor had even the announcement by Helen that she had been proposed to by, and had accepted, Captain Elphinstone as her future husband been accompanied by any details regarding his appearance and manners,

which were calculated to effectually raise that now all important personage above the unromantic circle of the "common-place." The temperament of the younger girl was in many respects the reverse of that which Nature had bestowed upon her sister. In kindness and generosity of heart and mind, they were not unequally matched, but in May, the possession of these qualities lay more upon the surface of things than was the case with Helen. The latter was, taking her youth into consideration, singularly self-contained and undemonstrative. To strangers she conveyed the idea that her nature was a cold one, and it was only the quicker sighted, and those who deemed her idiosyncrasy worthy of study, who could be said to enjoy the privilege of making acquaintance with her inner

self. May, on the contrary, was endowed with neither the wish nor the power to conceal, whether by silence or by words, the thoughts with which her heart and mind were full. Hitherto no evil, either to herself or others, had resulted from the unguarded outspokenness of this impulsive maiden, or from the indulgence in her every whim which from her very infancy had been the course pursued towards her. In the comparative solitude of her Cornish home she had been safe from the complications which, especially in the case of a character such as hers, are fraught with danger; but now, Life, with its stern realities, its temptations, its perils and its joys, was for the first time opening out before her; and the girl, like a child playing at the edge of a precipice, saw

nothing but the flowers with which the brow of the yawning gulf was masked.

Amongst the earliest visitors to whom May Durant was introduced, were Lady Gregorie and Miss Vidal. The distance of Ivy Combe from the barracks was by the carriage road about nine miles, but there was a nearer way for horsemen, along some pretty footpaths, and through pleasant grass fields to the little Junction Station, four miles from which Ivy Combe, a perfect nest of verdure, became visible to the passers-by. On the afternoon of the day when Lady Gregorie in her victoria drove, in order, as Miss Vidal said, to pay a visit of inspection to the cottage, two officers in the undress uniform of the Chalkshire Rifles might have been seen

riding slowly towards the self-same bourn. The men were none other than Guy Leycester and his subaltern Lieutenant Cardew, the end and object of whose ride being also that of calling on the lately-installed inhabitants of the *quasi* farmhouse.

“What a bore this turning up of a new Durant girl is,” Leycester, as he slaps to its death a horse-fly which is ravening on the glossy neck of his steed, lazily remarks. “The first one, Elphinstone’s *fiancée*, gave one no trouble; she didn’t, from the beginning—I could see that plainly—either expect or want to be spooned.”

“And then she was so awfully cold, don’t you know,” put in the younger man. “Fancy now, asking a girl like that for a flower.”

“Or a kiss, or any trifle of that kind,” Guy, with a languid smile, suggests. “Upon my word, Cardew, I almost envy you young fellows when I see the way you carry on. Ready! Present! Fire! That’s your sort of motto. You go at your flirtations with a will,—fancy yourselves intensely sentimental, and, while perfectly aware that your little affair will come to nothing, the enjoyment you get out of it seems to be intense.”

Cardew vouchsafes no response to this chaffing tirade, but, after a few minutes’ silence, says,—

“I wonder what makes you hate talking to girls so much.”

“Well, for one thing,” rejoins his companion, “it is this; either they know nothing—which makes them hang very

heavy on hand ; or it is the other way—which is simply disgusting. There are, to my thinking, few creatures more offensive than girls who have made of mankind the reverse of a ‘proper’ study. It is odious enough when they dress and talk like men, but when they force upon us the conviction that they have nothing, as regards our inner life, to learn, I, for one, hold them absolutely in abhorrence.”

“But,” asks the younger man, who seemed resolved to get, if possible, to the root of the matter, “did you never, when you were quite young, fall in love?”

“Well,” rejoins Guy, “I cannot say that the falling in love, after your fashion, ever, as far back as I can remember, either came in my way, or

strongly recommended itself to my fancy. Mind I do not say that your plan of proceeding is not probably the best and safest; and sometimes, when I think of the advice of a crafty old godfather of mine, and of the warnings which he gave me, I almost wish that I had not neglected them."

"But what were the warnings? What did he say?" inquires Cardew, who, like all the youngsters, looked upon Guy as a very treasury of worldly wisdom.

"Well, he simply told me to study, and inwardly digest certain Chapters in the book of Ecclesiastes. They are not, as the old gentleman said, exactly calculated for family reading, say at morning or evening prayer time, for instance, but they are wonderful for their wisdom; and I only wish—but here we are at

the Combe. What a lovely place it is !
And if I could envy any man who is
about to barter away his liberty, that
man would be Elphinstone, whose court-
ing lines have fallen in such pleasant
as these."





CHAPTER II.

MAY, THE LION TAMER.

IT would be hard to decide what was in May Durant, the especial charm which rendered her in the eyes of all men so wonderfully sweet and winning. Her beauty assuredly was both great and incontestible, but that alone, seeing that other young creatures have lashes as long and dark, teeth as white and perfect, and a complexion as pure and delicate, would not be sufficient to account for the charm which she, all unconsciously, exercised

over those with whom she came in contact. Perhaps it was to the atmosphere of *brightness* which surrounded her that this child of Nature was in part indebted for the interest which she rarely, if ever, failed to excite. A "blythe spirit" truly was she, and one who, like the lark to which Shelley sang and listened, could hardly, by the imagination of her fellow-beings, escape being looked upon as a creature differing greatly from what is vulgarly termed the common run.

"Hail to thee blythe spirit! *Girl* thou never wert,"

was an apostrophe which Guy Leycester, strong in his prejudice against the young ladies of his country, in silence addressed to bonnie May Durant, when, offering,

without a vestige of shyness, her small hand for his acceptance, she said,—

“I am so glad to see you. I have wished so much to say something of what I feel for your great kindness to poor Affy and to us.”

“What kindness? I do not understand,” said Guy, whilst the air of almost stupid ignorance which he summoned to his features, called forth a peal of rippling laughter from May.

“Oh!” she said, “that is ridiculous. As if you did not know what I mean. But you will let me be grateful, won’t you? Rowley told me that you would think it a nuisance to be thanked, but—”

“Well, it is a nuisance, or rather would be, from anyone else—to be thanked for doing nothing,” interrupted Guy.

“But you did do something,” persisted

the girl. "You stood by us in our troubles. You went all the way to Paris to find poor Affy, and bring him back to mother—"

"In other words, I was bored to death in barracks, and Elphinstone, like the good fellow that he is, paid all my expenses, and sent me on a jolly lark, rejoicing."

"Oh!" exclaimed May, lifting her beautiful, fearless eyes to the face of her interlocutor, "I do not say that I think you are as good as Rowley—but then *he* is perfect, and we cannot"—this with a small spice of coquetry, which in Leycester's eyes gave her an added charm—"all be that."

The Durants and their visitors are sitting and standing on the not over-well-kept lawn which stretches in front

of the house. Over their heads, and affording them efficient shelter from the beams of the afternoon sun, stretch the branches of an old and far-spreading cedar tree; and whilst the tea which has been ordered, is in preparation, more than one amongst the group is, though apparently wholly engaged in talking and in listening, mentally occupied in making comments on those around them. This is especially the case with Rowley Elphinstone. He is gifted with very keen powers of perception, and the meeting between Guy and his future sister-in-law has both amused and slightly alarmed him. If Leycester should, for the first time since he has grown to man's estate, be fascinated by other charms than those which older and more experienced women have hitherto had for him, what hope

would there be, he told himself, for May. Great as is his own regard for his brother-officer, Rowley is keenly alive to the dangerous nature of his faults. Of fixed principles of action he possesses none, but is liable to be carried away on the path of evil-doing by every fierce temptation by which he happens to be assailed. The very softness and tenderness of his heart are against his standing uprightly; for if sweet May should learn to love him (and what, Rowley asks himself, is more terribly probable), Guy is not the man, however much he may desire to follow the dictates of honour, to leave her un comforted,—“to her sorrow.” These thoughts flash through his mind whilst the girl in her simple muslin dress is helping his own Helen to perform the duties of hostess

at the tea-table which the tidy parlour-maid—an importation from Devonshire—has made ready under the cedar boughs. How widely different, yet both how rarely lovely, are the daughters of the pale, delicate-looking woman who, without a thought of coming danger, is enjoying, with all a convalescent's keen appreciation of present pleasure, the scene of which she is the quiet spectator.

Guy Leycester, to whose errors Mrs Durant is, by reason of his past kindness to her son, entirely blind, is, with his arm on the back of her chair, stooping his tall head to the level of hers, and saying, in the caressing voice which women find so charming, that he is glad to see her installed at the Cottage.

“It would be delightful,” he adds, “if we could keep you here altogether.

Cornwall is so awfully far away, and Elphinstone says that the owner of this pretty place wishes to sell it now."

"But how is a widow as poor as I am, likely to profit by this change in his intentions?" smiled Mrs Durant. "He asks, I hear, three thousand pounds; now if it were a case of twenty pence instead of so many shillings, I might feel justified in turning the matter over in my mind."

"Now, mother, what are you talking of?" asked May, who, as she flitted past with a small jug of cream for Lady Gregorie's tea, overheard Mrs Durant's last words. "You are never, you know, to talk about money. It is a perfectly hateful thing! Is it not, Captain Leycester? It makes people quarrel when they would otherwise be peace-

able ; and besides, dear—" this to the mother, whose tenderly admiring eyes were fixed upon her child's bright face, "your headaches are always worse after you have gone through—as you call it — your accounts. Now, Captain Leycester, don't you, as well as mother, dislike the trouble of counting up your money ?"

"Can't say," laughed Guy, "for I don't possess any to count up."

"Really? I am almost glad, for it makes you more like us, as friends ought to be. I think—"

"But you don't object to Elphinstone being rich, do you? I thought he was your standard of perfection."

"Ah, yes, so he is. I forgot; and I consider Nellie to be the luckiest girl in the whole world; but still—

Oh, Miss Vidal, let me take your cup!" cried May, as she darted forward a step or two to prevent Lady Gregorie's companion from undergoing the trouble of carrying her cup and saucer to the tea-table. That Em showed less than no appreciation of the attention, was a circumstance which entirely escaped the younger girl's observation.

After that day, Guy came very frequently to Ivy Combe, so frequently, indeed, that Mrs Durant, simple-minded as she was, and strongly biassed in his favour, began to feel, on May's account, slightly disturbed and anxious. The good-natured activity which he had displayed when her boy was in sore trouble, had been so often dwelt upon with grateful satisfaction by the widow, that, as if by common, but tacit con-

sent, she had been kept in ignorance of not a few particulars concerning his position and conduct which to have known might have been instrumental in saving the unsuspecting woman from many an after pang. That he was far from being, as was the case of her much-loved Rowley, an excellent matrimonial *parti*, she was well aware, and rumour that the most popular man in the Chalkshire Rifles was not altogether free from debt had reached her ears; but as a set-off to these disquieting rumours concerning one whose admiration for her fair young daughter was unmistakable, there was that not only in Captain Leycester's birth and position but in his general bearing, which struck the widow as so many guarantees against his being really a sufferer from straitened means. The

plain gold ring which he wore upon his little finger, and the chain which secured his exquisitely-beautiful hunting watch, were so massive; and then in the matter of gloves, he, when out of uniform, showed himself so regardless of expense, that his very appearance, guiltless as he was of the slightest approach to swagger, might, so thought Mrs Durant in her happy but dangerous ignorance of the world and of mankind, be taken as a living contradiction of the reports concerning Guy which were spread abroad.

Whilst watching with true motherly tenderness the progress of May's love idyll, the only bugbear of which the mother stood in dread was a long engagement for her child. It was so more than probable that Captain Leycester's

people would object to his marriage with a portionless girl; and then there would be for May the weary time of waiting, of separation, and possibly—for men were not always constant—of doubt. This fear gave rise to many conflicts in the widow's mind. It was, she thought, perhaps her duty to speak either to May, or to their now almost daily guest, on the subject of which her heart was full; but the gift of moral courage had been denied to her, and then they seemed so happy, those two, that she shrank from disturbing, by her nervous questionings, the joyous current of their lives. From this preamble it will be seen that Mrs Durant anticipated for her darling none of those far more crushing evils which, had her experience been greater, must have stared her in the face. Her confi-

dence in Guy's honour was unbounded; and, after all, what, this foolishly romantic parent asked herself, was comparative poverty when it was shared by a loving and faithful husband? Her own experience of married life with the excellent clergyman with whom her lot had been joined, had sufficiently proved to her that an income of five hundred a year was quite sufficient to marry on, and be contented with; and she could not bring herself to believe that eventually, when Captain Leycester showed a serious disposition to "settle down," his family would stand in the way of his happiness. Poor Mrs Durant! She little knew how small a chance there was that either Lady Alicia or the Admiral would draw their purse-strings in their son's behalf!

But although a tiresome amount of

delay and waiting was the worst form which her fears for May assumed, Mrs Durant resolved—delicate as was the matter in hand—to feel her way with her future son-in-law on the subject of his brother-officer's attentions to her girl. The month of August was now tolerably far advanced, and Helen's marriage was fixed for the first week in September. Engrossed as he naturally was by the daily interest and excitement by which his life was filled, Elphinstone's thoughts had been a good deal, if not altogether, diverted from matters with which Helen and the approaching ceremony were not intimately connected. He was very fond of May, and for Helen's sake, as well as her own, would have made every effort, had he observed the peril in which she stood, to save her from impending harm ;

but, kind man, and unselfish albeit he was, his present happiness so entirely engrossed his thoughts that, as I before said, May and her interests were for the time forgotten. It was not often that Mrs Durant could reckon on an opportunity of seeing Rowley Elphinstone alone, but one morning, whilst Helen was engaged in "trying on" one of the dresses of which her trousseau was to be composed, the widow, with a slight tremor in her voice, for this taking upon herself to interfere in the *affaires de cœur* of her grown-up daughter was an act from which her sensitive nature caused her to recoil, asked the bridegroom-elect to walk with her round the garden, and listen patiently whilst she asked him for his advice.

"Certainly, dear mother," he replied

(he always at Helen's request, called Mrs Durant "mother," now). "It is a delicious day, and a stroll will do you good."

Whereupon, the small, frail woman, leaning upon his strong right arm, stepped with him out of the porch upon the lawn.





CHAPTER III.

THE COLONEL'S WIFE IS IN A FIX.

“**B**UT, Wilfred, dear, I thought you would agree with me that diamonds by daylight are in wretched taste. Besides, the setting of mine is so terribly old fashioned! I could not wear them as they are.”

“Probably not, but nothing can be easier than having them reset. I should like to have a look at them. Augustine has them in her charge, of course. If I ring for Symonds, he can tell her what we want.”

A Yeomanry Ball, in which the Colonel is interested, is about to take place in a neighbouring county, and Sir Wilfred Gregorie, who is proud of his wife's beauty, has decided that she shall wear the diamonds which, although he has seen them but once, he knows to be of the first water, on the occasion. Lady Gregorie's sensations, when he made his wishes known, may be easier imagined than described. She, as we already know, not only dearly loved, but feared her husband, whilst she valued his good opinion as a treasure beyond all price. Guiltless though she was of even an unworthy thought, she trembled now, less through fear of his anger than from the miserable certainty that were the truth to become known to him she would thereafter become a lowered creature in his sight. By some

process of thought, which it is unnecessary to analyse, she had become cognisant of the fact that, neither in the matter of truthfulness, nor of reticence of conduct did her sex in general stand high in the opinion of her husband, and that she was herself an exception to this rule had also, in some inscrutable way, become patent to her. She had noticed more than once that when in her presence, the tone of the conversation had become a trifle over free, Sir Wilfred had, with no apparent intention, given it a more decorous turn; and that he desired to keep the purity of his wife's mind free from the faintest breath of contamination, was evidenced by his habit, in the familiar intercourse of domestic life, of steering clear of any subjects save those which the most delicate-minded

of her sex could listen to without a blush.

As I before said, the idea of falling from the high place which in her husband's estimation she was conscious of holding, gave exquisite pain to Florence; whilst so great also was her fear of his just anger when the truth should become known to him, that her response to his last suggestion was, owing to the tremor in her voice, scarcely audible.

"I rather think," she said, "that Augustine is out, so that I had better go for them myself."

And go, with trembling limbs, and a wildly-beating heart, she did, but not in the first instance to her own room. In this terrible emergency, she felt the want of companionship, of support, and, above all, of advice as to

how, in this terrible crisis, it behoved her to act.

“Oh, Em!” she cried, as the door closed upon her frantic entrance, “what, in Heaven’s name, shall we do? Sir Wilfred has asked to see the diamonds. He says that I must wear them at the Yeomanry Ball, and he will not—oh, I see that he will not, be put off!”

She has thrown herself on a chair, her rich velvet tea-gown (for five o’clock is near at hand, and visitors are expected) being all crumpled up under her failing limbs, and she is wringing her white hands together in the extremity of her fear. Emily pauses in the act of adorning herself, and, partly on her own account, and partly, for she is not altogether destitute of feeling, because the sight of her

friend's unmistakable agony of mind awakens a sense of compassion in her heart, she says excitedly,—

“You poor thing, how terrible! But we *must* devise some means of escape. Cannot you say that Augustine, who has the key, is not in the house? and meanwhile, if Brereton is in barracks, and has not yet parted with the diamonds, he may be induced to lend them for a week or two. I could perhaps go out this evening—”

“But you must go directly, dear, if any good is to be done!” cried Lady Gregorie vehemently (for Em’s suggestion had raised her from the depths of despair to the higher regions of hope). “If there is to be any chance of saving me, not a moment must be lost. I must return at once to Wilfred

with my story about Augustine, and we dare not lose a chance of finding that dreadful man at home."

"It is but a poor one, I am afraid," Emily Vidal says crossly, for she enjoys the *laissez aller* of Lady Gregorie's teas, and feels by no means inclined to accept the alternative of a walk in the direction of the barracks, for the bare chance of falling in with Major Brereton. "A week has, you know, gone by since he took the diamonds, and he is not the kind of man to let in such a matter the grass grow under his feet. On second thoughts, too, dear Flo, I consider that it would hardly be prudent on my part to seek the man out. I could write him a note, asking him where to meet me."

"But the time! Think of how much

the doing what you say would take!" Florence exclaims distractedly. "And Augustine, who never stays out long! Oh!" she cries, springing from her seat, and walking about like one demented, "if Wilfred were ever to know of my wickedness—my falsehoods—my utter baseness, I hope, oh, how I hope, that I should die!"

"Nonsense; it is no question of dying," practical Em says stoutly. "Men are the most easy creatures in life to deceive, if you only understand how to do it. Now you must just go downstairs, and look pretty, and unconcerned. You are so sorry, you must say, that Augustine is out, and you have been kept all this time by trying in vain to open the drawer in which your jewels are locked up. Sir Wilfred will not

suspect you; and in the meanwhile I will write a few lines to Major Brereton, asking him to afternoon tea to-morrow."

"But Sir Wilfred will never believe," said Florence, "that Augustine, who so rarely leaves the house, has been away—"

"Oh, if you have so little gumption that you cannot make your husband believe anything you like, you deserve to have him down upon you," Emily, in her off-handed manner, was beginning, when Lady Gregorie, with the hurried exclamation of "I must not waste time here! He will begin to wonder what is keeping me so long," rushed impetuously from the room.

Under the influence of fear, miracles have ere now been worked; and Flor-

ence, stimulated by her dread of discovery, found in herself powers of dissimulation of which she had before been ignorant. Sir Wilfred was too essentially a manly character for suspicion to find ready admission to his mind. There was nothing in the temporary absence of Augustine calculated to excite either his surprise or his curiosity. He had noticed nothing unusual in his wife's manner, and was, in point of fact, in no hurry to inspect the jewels, the mere mention of which had blanched Lady Gregorie's cheek, and sent her trembling from his presence. The quiescent fashion in which he accepted the reason given for delay, caused a hope to spring up in the delinquent's breast that the *fad*, as Emily called it, of seeing his wife in her

“braverie,” had passed from his mind. This hope, however, proved illusory, for on that very evening, whilst his wife’s beautiful hair was being arranged according to the latest fashion, by Augustine’s skilful fingers, the Colonel, addressing the latter from the adjoining room, requested her to bring the diamonds which were in her charge to the drawing-room.

“*Parfaitement, Monsieur le Colonel,*” responded the abigail; and if, whilst continuing her task of adornment, she noticed the sudden shiver which at the order given had thrilled through her lady’s veins, Mademoiselle Augustine was too essentially a Frenchwoman for any notice to be taken by her of a circumstance so trivial.

Lady Gregorie, assuming an appear-

ance of composure which she was very far from feeling, instructed her maid to wait until she had herself finished dressing, before she (Augustine) set about obeying Sir Wilfred's behests.

"There is no occasion for haste," she said, in French. "The Colonel wishes me to have the diamonds reset for the ball on the 20th of August; and even if you bring them after dinner, it will be soon enough;" and having so said, the harassed woman descended with tottering footsteps the stairs on which she had been hitherto accustomed to tread with so light a heart. Poor terror-stricken creature! it had seemed to her that the delay of an hour would be something gained; but even that short respite was denied to her, for scarcely had ten minutes since her entrance into

the drawing-room elapsed, when Augustine, rushing in with the speed of electricity, exclaimed in the high-pitched voice which, especially in moments of excitement, is characteristic of her countrywomen,—

“ *Oh, Monsieur le Colonel! Quel malheur! Ils ne sont plus là, les diamants de Madame! Et cependant, je les ai vu il y à une semaine, dans le tiroir de la commode! Et sans doute, après que Mees Veedal à demandé ma clé pour—*”

But at this juncture Sir Wilfred, whose knowledge of the French language was limited, lost patience, and broke in upon the waiting-woman's harangue,—

“ For God's sake,” he said to his wife, “ tell me what the infernal chatterer means. And, child, don't, pray,

look so white and scared about it. Why, even if the diamonds are missing—which I imagine to be the case—the loss need not affect you. What did she say though, Augustine, about Miss Vidal? Ah, here comes the young lady herself,” he added, as Em, dressed in a becoming demi-toilette, entered the room, “and possibly she may be able to explain matters to her own and Augustine’s satisfaction.”

“It is about the diamonds we are talking, dear,” Lady Gregorie, in a faltering voice, and answering the girl’s glance of appeal, said, “Augustine tells us that she has not seen them since the day when we tried—don’t you remember?—to brighten them up with rouge powder.”

“But, surely,” said Em, who probably was of the great Statesman’s opinion

that there is nothing like audacity for carrying a much-worried individual through a difficulty, "surely Augustine must have locked the cases up. I left them on the table in the corridor, close to her room, and if she had only used her eyes, she must have seen the cases as she passed along."

To describe the storm of words which at this—as she considered it—implied accusation poured like a torrent from Augustine's lips would be impossible, and it required all the authority, together with the long experience in command which was possessed by the Colonel, to reduce to silence the desperately indignant woman. Outwardly calm was he, as when in the heat of battle he had in his clear, ringing voice given to his men the command of "Forward, Riflemen, and drive them from

the guns!" but inwardly the fire of wrath was kindling. More than one circumstance connected with the scene was, somewhat ludicrously, perhaps, provocative of ignition. Symonds the butler—an old soldier whose belief in his master's infallibility was as unshakable as that of the most zealous pervert who ever "went over"—as the saying is—to Rome, had already made his *entrée* with the solemn and all-important announcement that dinner was on the table; and the Colonel, who preferred, even in the eyes of his major-domo, to be recognised as a hero, and whose dislike to being kept waiting for his dinner was thoroughly British in its intensity, was rendered acutely sensible to the annoyance of being forced to listen to the vociferous rancour of Augustine's sharp tongue.

The rush of the torrent fairly for a few moments overpowered him, nor was it till the indignant Frenchwoman paused for breath, that he, with a choleric expletive of "Confound you, woman, hold your tongue!" took her by the shoulder, and fairly expelled her from the room.

As, with Miss Vidal on his arm, the autocratic Colonel proceeded to the dining-room, his bosom's lord was far from sitting lightly on its throne. The melancholy facts that the soup was cold and the turbot overboiled, did not tend to the recovery of his temper; and then it cannot be denied that the scene of which he had just been the witness had left an unpleasant impression on his mind. As regarded the diamonds, their possible loss did not for the moment greatly trouble him, but there was in

the entire transaction, as well as in the demeanour of all concerned, an element of mystery, which rendered him uncomfortable. Being essentially a well-bred man, he did his utmost to conceal from his wife's guest the fact that he was mentally discomposed. Em had never been a favourite of his; as a rule, indeed, men are, I am inclined to think, apt to take a prejudice against the friends of their wives' unmarried days. Silly, though probably innocent, secrets may have been mutually imparted by the girls, secrets of which the future husbands know nothing, and which may contain the germs of future mischief. In the case of Emily Vidal, Sir Wilfred entertained, however, no such suspicion. He could not, if questioned on the subject, have given any reason for the slight

prejudice which he entertained against her ; but now, as she sat smiling and prattling at his right hand, the contrast between her unusual animation and the pallid looks and unaccustomed silence of his wife, struck him as suggestive of collusion. The bare idea that so it was, brought a frown of anger to his brow ; and yet his imagination had carried him but a short distance into the realms of possible eventualities. Florence had been of late, it might be, over extravagant in her expenditure. Women who dress well must, he told himself, necessarily spend a good deal of money on their toilettes, and his wife, frightened at the magnitude of her milliner's bill, had, perhaps (he had heard of the like doings before), raised money upon her trinkets, in order to escape from her pecuniary embarrassments.

The suspicion, especially in the case of a proud man, and one who had hitherto placed unbounded trust in the straightforward openness of his wife's character, was quite sufficient to account, not only for the gloom which suddenly crept over Sir Wilfred's countenance, but for the heavy frown with which his brows were knit; and Lady Gregorie, as she from time to time cast furtive glances across the *épergne* at his troubled, moody face, shuddered at the thoughts which might even now be passing through his mind.





CHAPTER IV.

FLORENCE IS GIVEN A CHANCE.

“**N**OW, Florence, all I ask of you is to speak out, and surely that is not too much to expect. If you have—to borrow a slang expression—put those confounded diamonds up the spout,” Sir Wilfred adds lightly, for he is desirous of encouraging his wife to be open and above board with him, “tell me so at once. It is not a particularly nice thing to do, but women are weak vessels, and I can quite understand—”

“But, Wilfred, I never dreamt, I could not, of doing such a thing,” Lady Gregorie breaks in eagerly. “I have not a single very big bill to pay, and, if I had, I should ask you for the money, and not the miserable pawnbrokers.”

“I believe you, dear; now, don’t begin to cry,” the Colonel, perceiving with alarm that a dainty white cambric handkerchief is about to be brought into play; “and just tell me, there can be no difficulty about that, what you had the diamonds out for, and when and where you saw them last?”

The long and tedious evening has come to an end at last. Miss Vidal, after singing a French romance or two, had pleaded fatigue, and retired to her own room, and now Sir Wilfred, finding himself *tête-à-tête* with his wife, was en-

deavouring to obtain from her an elucidation of the mystery by which the loss of the jewels was at present surrounded. His last questions left her for a few moments mute, but at length the stern necessity of the case drew from her a hesitating and unsatisfactory-sounding reply.

“Emily and I were speaking of my dress for the Dalsford Ball,” she said, “and the diamonds having been spoken of, she expressed a wish to see them. They looked dull, she said, and wanted cleaning sadly, so we set to work to rub them up. When we had made them as bright as we could, she took them away, and I never saw them afterwards.” . . .

“You concluded, of course,” the Colonel said, “that she put them back into their proper place, and locked them

up? By the way, about the key, what do you suppose she did with that? I wish that I had thought of asking her."

"But, dear Wilfred, how could you? It would look so odd,—as if—as if—you thought that she had taken the jewels herself."

"And, by Jove!" broke out Sir Wilfred, as he sprang from his seat, and commenced walking up and down the room, "if she does not give a clearer account of the affair, I almost think I shall do so. The matter must not rest as it is; and if things do not appear more satisfactory to-morrow, I shall put it in the hands of the police. Augustine is evidently furious at the idea that she is being unjustly suspected."

"Which is so stupid of her!" ex-

claimed Florence; "but I have always noticed that when anything is lost, or mislaid, servants immediately take the initiative, and declare that *they* had nothing to do with the matter."

"Which I, for one, do not wonder at. They have not much besides their characters to carry them through life, and, as a matter of course, they stand up for them. Now if Miss Vidal—"

"Oh! Wilfred, you seem to imply that she is as likely as a maid-servant to take what does not belong to her."

"I imply nothing, my dear Florence, but I must say, seeing that she was the last person in whose hands the ornaments were known to be, that her behaviour was rather singular."

"Because she did not at once fly out like Augustine, and protest her

innocence! Is that what you mean? As if she could for a moment imagine that she was suspected of being a thief!"

"But she has not been suspected," the Colonel said, more mildly. "Far be it from me to throw an unmerited slur upon any human being, to whatever class that being might belong; but, my dear child, you must, I think, agree with me, that to leave this affair unsifted would be worse than a mistake. Am I not right in this, my dear?" added the Colonel, looking, as he spoke, with wistful, tender eyes into his wife's troubled face.

And Florence? Did it not, whilst thus kindly questioned, occur to that poor trembler that now, if ever, was the moment for confession, that now, before circumstances *compelled* her to be truth-

ful—would be the blessed time when her sacrifice to Principle might be accepted, and the wrath of her husband turned away? Alas! for her, poor soul, that we are compelled to answer in the negative. Moral cowardice—a defect which is too often joined to the dangerous one of Impulsiveness—barred the way to her right doing! During a few swiftly-passing seconds the idea of confession, darting with lightning speed through her brain, set every pulse within her body wildly thrilling, but, a moment later, reaction with equal velocity set in, and, terrified at the thought of the danger she had escaped, she could have thanked her God in that she had not been led by her fears into an admission of her girlish folly.

I have said that Sir Wilfred Gregorie

was a man not given to jealousy, and that the trust he placed in his wife's rectitude and sense of honour was far from being easily shaken; it was probably, therefore, owing to that confidence, that her reply, when, a few moments later, she uttered it, in no way tended to increase his perplexity. She had striven her hardest, and that with some success, to say with composure of voice and manner,—

“I think that you are perfectly right, dear. To suspect an innocent person would be dreadful. Still I wish, oh, so much, dear Wil, that you could bring yourself to think better of poor Em. She is very warm-hearted, and has been a true friend to me—”

“A girl friend, my child, who probably you would have been better with-

out. But you look tired, and there is no need to discuss Miss Em's merits so late in the night as this. Tell Augustine, with my compliments, that I consider her an angel of probity, and trustworthiness." And having so said, the master of the house lit his cigar in the outer hall, and proceeded, according to his nightly custom, to take a few turns in the Square, previous to retiring to rest.

Early on the following morning, Florence Gregorie, after a sleepless night, wrapped herself in a pretty blue cashmere *peignoir*, and fled along the corridor to her friend's room. Em, lying prone—as the novelists say—upon her bed, was aroused from a late sleep by the sudden entrance of her hostess, and without making any effort to suppress a yawn, inquired, in a

slightly aggrieved tone, what was the matter.

“Something very terrible you may be sure, or I should not have disturbed you,” said Lady Gregorie apologetically. She was not a woman given to take offence lightly, but the absence of sympathy in her guest’s tone struck unpleasantly on her own overwrought nerves, and for a passing moment the “warm-hearted” friend of her girlhood appeared to the unhappy woman in something approaching to her real colours.

Miss Vidal perceived her mistake, and hastened to rectify it.

“Dear Flo, what an idea!” she cried. “Think of *your* apologising to *me*! I had had a bad night, and was cross and sleepy, I suppose; but I am wide

awake now, so tell me what has happened, for I am dying to know."

"Sir Wilfred is actually going—if indeed he has not already gone—to see the Inspector of Police at Broadmere about what he calls the robbery! What do you think of that?"

"Why, that he could not do a safer thing for *us*. They will, of course, find out nothing, and it will end by their declaring that it is what they call a 'house affair,' which means that the burglary has been done by discharged servants, who must, of course, be well acquainted with the house, and with the habits of the inmates."

"But, Em, such an idea may lead to innocent persons being suspected of the crime, and that would be too

wicked!" exclaimed Florence. "And oh, Em, if you did but know how very near I was last night to telling the whole truth to Wilfred! I shall, I know, some day when he is especially kind, for I have done nothing really bad; and, after all, he could but kill me."

"Which you know he wouldn't do," Em, springing up in her bed, vehemently ejaculates. "But what about others? What about me? Oh, you are too selfish! You forget how I have helped you,—stood by you!"

"But there is nothing he would think wrong in that," said Florence soothingly; "and I am sure that Sir Wilfred would see only kindness in what you have done for me. If I should ever summon courage to own to him how false I

have been, I promise you, dear, that my husband shall never think evil of you."

"*He shall never think evil of you,*" repeated Miss Vidal to herself, and oh! how sharply the generous words struck on the nerves, if not on the conscience, of the woman who knew herself to be a thief! Fear of detection, however, spoke far more strongly in her guilty breast than did any feeling either of gratitude or remorse. If, whispered selfish terror, in her ear, Florence should, in a moment of idiotic weakness, make a clean breast of it to her husband, detection of her own share in the crime would almost to a certainty follow, and therefore it was that she used all the eloquence of which she was mistress, to dissuade her friend from yielding,

in this case, to a wise and praiseworthy impulse.

“You *must* not do it,” she urged. “For your own sake, I entreat you not to put jealous fears into Sir Wilfred’s head. Promise me, dearest Flo, never to do that which could not fail to bring trouble upon us both. Think, too, of the position in which your confession would place Major Brereton. I do not say that he in the slightest degree deserves consideration, for the man is neither more nor less than a villain, still, having caught him in a net, and having received that for which you bargained, you cannot surely, in common justice, take any steps likely to tend to his punishment and ruin.”

“I do not, of course, wish to have him punished,” Florence rejoined; “but

I am so certain that were Sir Wilfred to learn the truth, he would take no single step either towards the recovery of the property, or the conviction of the thief, that no consideration for Major Brereton would hinder me from speaking out."

"But for my sake, dear," pleaded Em. "Remember what I should feel at the thought of Sir Wilfred being cognisant of the part which, for your sake, I have taken in this matter. Oh, Florence, promise me that you will keep our secret. If you do not, I shall never know another happy moment, but shall always be thinking that Sir Wilfred dislikes and despises me, even more than I feel sure he does at present."

For a long time, and with the ac-

companionment of many tears, Miss Vidal persisted in her entreaties, but on this occasion, at least, Lady Gregorie showed herself capable of firmness. She entertained, almost unknown to herself, an internal conviction that until she made confession of her fault, she would be as one tossed on the restless sea of anxiety and trouble. Her "harbour lights" were the gleams which she saw across the heaving waves of cowardly irresolution, and those lights she could only reach when, like the Pilgrim of old, she had cast down her burden, and stood free and repentant and before her Judge.

"No, I cannot promise," she repeated firmly. "I may at any moment find myself driven by impulse to free myself from this load of guilt, and that impulse it will, I know, be wholly out

of my power to disobey. I repeat though, Em, my solemn word of honour, that *you* shall be held by Sir Wilfred as totally free from blame. It would be indeed hard were you, because of an act of kindness so purely disinterested as was yours towards myself, to become, in the very slightest degree, a sufferer."





CHAPTER V.

A MOTHER AT BAY.

“**W**ELL, what is the matter, dear Mrs Durant? You look worried. Has the wedding-dress,” asked the bridegroom-elect, with his genial smile, and looking kindly down at the fragile form of Nellie’s “little mother,” “come suddenly to grief? or has—”

“Oh, no; it has nothing to do with the *trousseau*, dear Rowley, and I dare say that you will think me foolish

for being worried, but Captain Leicester comes here very often—”

“Ah!” ejaculated Elphinstone, “I should have thought of that. I have been too remiss,—too selfishly absorbed in my own happiness, and now—but tell me, you do not think—you do not fear, that May is beginning to like him—”

“Beginning! Oh, no. She, dear child, does not as yet, I am sure, understand her own feelings; but that she will learn to love him I feel sure—”

“To love him! Good God! What a terrible surprise! It is so contrary both to Guy’s habits as well as principles to make love to girls, that what you tell me seems impossible.”

“Ah, but remember, Rowley, how handsome he is, and how very *very*

charming. And why, tell me, should you be so dismayed about it? Captain Leycester is so good — so honourable. Surely you cannot in any way distrust him—”

She had stopped suddenly in her walk, and with an expression bordering on alarm upon her gentle matronly face, was looking up with eager questioning gaze into that of her companion. He, with his dark eyes apparently fixed upon the movements of an erratic butterfly which was disporting itself amongst the tiger lilies, remained for a few moments silent; then hesitatingly, and as if the utterance of what he had to say occasioned him some mental discomfort.

“Dear mother, I hardly know how to answer you. Guy is the best and dear-

est fellow in the world, but, where your sex, dear, are concerned, he is not, I fear, to be trusted."

"But what is it that you fear?" the mother, in increased trepidation, asked. "Surely"—blushing like a girl at her own temerity—"he would not harm my child?"

"Not intentionally: of that you may feel assured. If you have guessed rightly, which I trust in Heaven is not the case, and that dear little May cares for him, he has, probably, become insensibly attracted to her, and—"

"Well, dear Rowley, if there is love on both sides, and he is honourable and true, all will come right, we may hope, in time. They may have to wait, which is, for a young girl, dreary work; but, after all," continued the widow, as memo-

ries of days gone by, when *her* young lover whispered to her in the twilight of the happy times that were to come, crowded round her, and filled her eyes with tears, “there is no season in a woman’s life to which, in after days, she can look back, which is so utterly without alloy as that of courtship.”

“I almost believe it,” was Elphinstone’s response ; “but, to make that season a really happy one, there must be Hope in the distance, and a prospect, near or far, as the case may be, that the loving couple will come together at last ; and here—ah, dear mother ! the truth must be told—I see no hope at all.”

“Oh ! do not say so. My poor May ! And she is so happy now ! She was always bright ; but now—I do not know in what the change consists, only that

sometimes I think that she has grown more womanly and serious, and then again she will be in the wildest spirits! But, Rowley, tell me, I entreat you, your reasons for feeling so sure that nothing good can come of an intimacy which I suppose I ought never to have permitted. But I did not know; he had been so kind to my poor boy, and I could not have borne to see a cloud on May's sunny face."

"Do not blame yourself, dear mother," said the kind-hearted soldier, as he pressed within his own the trembling hand that rested on his arm. "I am the one who deserves your anger, and you must not, by your self-reproaches, heap coals of fire on my head. I ought to have been more wide-awake, but, as I said before, I have been so

selfishly engrossed by my own happiness, that I forgot to warn you of the danger which May might possibly be incurring. I cannot, however, believe that Leycester has been so unprincipled as to—what shall I call it?—actually deceive the child. That he is hopelessly and irretrievably in debt is well known. His people neither can nor will assist him further, and then—”

“Ah, do not hesitate; I am stronger than you think, and it is better for May’s sake that I should know all—”

“May be so, but, all the same, I feel like a brute for torturing you so. Guy, too, who is one of my most attached friends, how little he thinks that, at this moment, I am occupied in opening your eyes to truths—as I fear they are—which you never before, I conclude,

heard of. For instance, about the ‘Shanty’—”

“What of it? We were very comfortable there, and I know that it was owing to Captain Leycester’s kindness that I was taken, during my illness, to Mr Denham’s house—”

“To which, had there existed any alternative to your doing so, you never should have gone,” interrupted Elphinstone. “Mrs Denham is— Well, a pretty woman, and her husband is, by all accounts, a brute. She has been more talked about, in regard to her intimacy with Guy, than she probably deserves; but then, you know,” this with a half smile, which was not wholly devoid of cynicism, “people cannot be always conversing about the weather.”

“That is true,” said the widow

sorrowfully, “and therefore we may hope—may not we?—that this poor lady has been more sinned against than sinning. Besides, if Guy is for the first time in his life strongly and deeply attached to a good, pure girl, a girl too, who is so lovable as May, he may be cured, do not you think so?” (looking wistfully into the soldier’s pitying eyes) “of his past follies.”

“Who can say? I, for one, should be afraid to answer for him. Indeed, indeed, dear Mrs Durant,” he continued, speaking with more decision than he had hitherto demonstrated, “you must take courage, and do battle at once against the enemy. If you wish it, I will speak to Guy on the subject. As May’s future brother-in-law, I have a sort of right to interfere, but I shall hate to use it; and

yet, knowing as I do that he, poor fellow, is a gambler to the core, he could hardly expect me to remain passive."

He had told her the worst now, and the unhappy mother literally shivered and shrunk under the blow. She had borne up bravely against the previous reasons by which Elphinstone had endeavoured to prove to her that her darling's hopes of happiness must of necessity be nipped in the bud. Her spirit was a sanguine one, and it was in her nature to hope the best. Some happy accident, some favourable turn of Fortune's wheel, might remedy the evil, great albeit it was — of impecuniosity, for does not the proverb say, that *tout arrive à qui sait attendre*? She could not, moreover, bring herself to believe that if there had been anything

“really wrong” between Mrs Denham and Captain Leycester, that the latter could have been instrumental in securing for her use and comfort the little “Shanty” where she had found the quiet and *bien être* which had so largely contributed to her recovery. She had not now for the first time to learn how prone are the gossips who in every community exist, to throw stones at their neighbours, and to see, instead of good, harm in everything. Yes she was, if not wholly, yet in some degree, prepared to cling to the hope that the course of May’s love, even though it should not run exactly “smooth,” need not thus early suffer shipwreck; but Rowley’s last words had struck at the root of all her fond imaginings. Hesitation was now for this poor mother at an end;

with a man possessed of the demon of play, she could not trust the future of her child; and so urgent seemed to her the peril into which that child had by her own carelessness been thrown, that as she hastily moved towards the porch, she said, with almost passionate eagerness,—

“I will warn poor May at once. I will do all I can to save her. Oh! how could I be so blind—so wicked?”

“Do not be in a hurry. Let me speak first to Leycester. You will be ill again, if you undertake this painful task. Or perhaps—what do you think? Nellie might help us a little in this difficulty.”

“No, no, dear Rowley,” Mrs Durant said resolutely. “It is only to her mother that a girl like our May-blossom could confide. Poor darling! How happy she

is ! Listen. It is one of his favourite songs that she is singing — ‘Love’s Young Dream.’ A dream from which I—her mother, who would save her if possible from even the shadow of a grief, am fated to awaken her.”

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With a noiseless footstep Mrs Durant entered the little sitting-room in which May, with her back to the door, was carolling, in her fresh young voice, and little dreaming of evil to come, the blythesome words:—

“Oh, there’s nothing half so sweet on earth as
Love’s young dream.”

The timid footfall as her mother crossed the room was neither heard nor heeded by the girl, whose soul was for the moment in the joyous music which her rosy lips were breathing, and it was

not until a gentle hand was placed upon her shoulder, that she turned her head towards the door.

“Naughty mother!” she cried gaily, and resting for a moment her soft cheek against her parent’s loving hand. “What have you and Rowley been talking about all this time? Nellie will be jealous if he trusts you with too many of his secrets. Besides, it is bad for you to be out so long in this hot sun.”

“It is cool here, darling, and we can talk quietly. Nellie is getting ready to ride with Captain Elphinstone.”

“*Captain Elphinstone* indeed! What a way to speak of him? Your own son-in-law almost! But, dear, now I look at you closely, I see that you seem pale and troubled. What is it,

darling? Nothing about Affy, I trust. Rowley has not been frightening you about our boy?"

May had drawn the evidently agitated woman to the sofa, and, seated by her side, was looking anxiously into the careworn face of the mother whose life was to her children a very precious thing. They had been so near to losing her, that now, more than ever, is her value felt. But now that the moment for action had arrived, the widow's courage almost fails her. It struck her well-nigh as an act of sacrilege to tear away the veil which hid from eyes profane the most secret and dearly-cherished feelings of her child, and so, catching at any pretext for gaining time, she with an unsuccessful effort at composure, said—

"No, darling, there is nothing wrong.

Nothing with regard to dear Affy, that need make us uneasy. It was partly of Captain Leycester that Rowley was speaking to me. I was saying that he came here very often; for, dear child, as you have just reminded me, Rowley is all but a near relation now, and as he is such an intimate friend of Captain Leycester's, I thought—"

"Oh, mother," interrupted the girl excitedly, whilst a crimson blush suffused her cheeks. "What did you think? And what have you been saying? I must go to Rowley. He may imagine—Oh, I do not know what he may not imagine, and I should die if he were to speak to Guy—"

"To Guy! Oh, my child," broke in Mrs Durant, whose fears were wrought

up to a climax by the child's evident excitement, and by the circumstance of her speaking thus familiarly of Captain Leycester, "has it come to this with you? And you, my darling, to have told me nothing! I have had my fears, but that you should have become so intimate with Captain Leycester as to speak of him as 'Guy' is too terrible, and makes me bitterly feel what a wicked, careless mother I have been."

At the sight of her parent's distress—for the tears were now dropping fast and all unwiped away down the widow's careworn cheeks—May, gliding to the floor, rested her small curly head against the self-reproachful woman's knee, and whilst suppressing with difficulty her rising sobs, murmured shyly,—

“You must not blame yourself, dear. You could not, good and kind as he has been to us, tell him not to come; and as he did come, how could I help loving him?”

“And he has told you—oh, May, how secret you have been!—that he cares for you? And—ah! I could not have believed it of my child, my little girl who I believed to be so true and honest—you have listened to, and believed in him.”

“I believe that he loves me,” the girl says proudly; “and only that he made me promise to say nothing yet of—of what had passed, you should have known all directly.”

At this frank announcement, Mrs Durant gives utterance to a hardly-suppressed groan.

“Oh,” she exclaims, “did not you—do you not *now* see how wrongly, how dishonourably he has acted?”

May, who is twisting round her small fingers the edging of her mother’s apron, keeps her downcast eyes fixed on that employment, whilst she says slowly,—

“Do not call him dishonourable, mother. He—began to care for me before he knew it, and then—”

“But, child,” Mrs Durant, taking advantage of the girl’s hesitation, exclaims, “have you ever thought how this dangerous folly is to end?”

“To end! I do not understand. Why should it end? Cannot we always care for one another? I shall never change, and as for Guy— Well, I feel as sure of him as I do of myself.”

“And you have known him only three weeks!” Mrs Durant, in the extremity of her surprise, ejaculates. “And has it never occurred to you, my poor child, that he may be as little worthy of your love as he is able, for various reasons, to marry? He is terribly in debt,—is addicted to the fatal vice of gambling.”

“I know it: he has told me all his faults.”

“All? Impossible! There are things—events in this life, errors which he may, perhaps, have inadvertently fallen into, which a man, let him be ever so heartless and unprincipled, *cannot* tell to a pure-minded girl like you. Captain Leycester has become entangled—at least so it is everywhere said, in an affair, but no—I cannot explain it to you.”

“Do not try, dear,” May, as she fondly caresses her mother’s hand, rejoins. “You are fond of Guy yourself, and I am sure—” she in her pretty, half-playful way continues, “that if you had been in my place, you would have trusted, and felt for him as I do.”

“Perhaps : I cannot say ; but I feel convinced that I could not have deceived the mother who loved me,—the mother who had never been hard and unforgiving to her children. Oh, May, my darling, you will never know —never at least until— But listen ! There is a ring ! And oh, I cannot see anyone !”

“Not even if it should be Guy ?” cried May, as, rising from her kneeling posture, she endeavoured to arrest her mother’s progress towards the door.

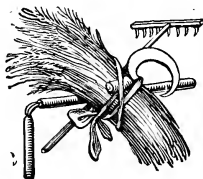
“You cannot say ‘Not at home’ to him.”

“I must. No, no—do you remain here. I will take Captain Leycester into the garden, and say to him what is in my mind.”

There was in the poor lady’s voice and manner an air of decision and of authority to which May was totally unaccustomed, and under the spell of which she at once succumbed. Mrs Durant hurried from the room, and the need of protection for her child lending her a fictitious courage, she closed the door behind her, and accosting Guy, whose ring at the bell it proved to be, she said kindly, but with a dignity of demeanour that was new to her,—

“Captain Leycester, *I* must receive

you in the garden to-day. Our space is, as you are aware, limited, and my daughter is at present occupied in the drawing-room."





CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN WITHOUT SIN.

IN a small room, prettily, but rather too cumbrously furnished, a room which opened by means of glass windows into a tiny garden tolerably well stocked with flowers, there sat one morning, a few weeks previously to the conversation between Mrs Durant and her daughter which I have just recorded, one of the comparatively few women who, acting solely upon principle, had been able to make a successful stand against

Guy Leycester's well-practised powers of fascination. There was a time, but that was over now, when he had tried his hardest to make a fatal impression upon this woman, whose husband was a sensual brute, and whose life was one long trial. He (Guy) had never known how fierce had been that woman's struggle against temptation, nor how bitterly she in her saddest moments, and when the sense of duty to her husband and her God momentarily slept, regretted the passionate love which she had found strength to resist.

It was the first early spring morning of the year. The sun shone brightly on the delicate green of the opening foliage, and the delicious scent of the sweetbriar leaves was wafted in from a low hedge which skirted her small garden.

Near to the open window of Mrs Denham's cottage, its solitary occupant was sitting, whilst feeling, as indeed often, on similar mornings, is the case with her, more than usually depressed and broken-spirited. The very perfume of the sweetbriar, together with that of a bunch of violets which Guy Leycester had sent to her that morning, seemed to add to her secret sense of melancholy ; and as she sat at her window, book in hand, but with her eyes fixed on vacancy, she—like the way-worn traveller in life's highway whom Keble, in his "Christian Year," has immortalised, could almost in her desolate heart have breathed the wish that her "weariness were death."

Suddenly, the reverie into which she had fallen was broken by the sound

of coming footsteps, and in a moment—she being one of the many women to whom the exigencies of daily life had taught the art of feigning—the cloud had vanished from her face, and, with a gracious smile, she held out to Guy Leycester a welcoming hand.

“How good of you,” she said, “to remember my birthday, and to send me such a huge bouquet of delicious violets! Ah, me! I am thirty-seven to day, and ought to feel too old, if not too wise, to value such birthday presents as anything more than a *banal* civility. It is stupid, and worse than stupid,” she, after a short pause, added, “to feel young when one is old. I call it absolutely revolting;” and Mrs Denham, having given voice to this opinion, leant back in her chair, looking as little revolting as it is

possible for a fair woman with a figure as yet untouched by Time, and with her still abundant hair shining golden in the sunlight, to appear. The world had been, after its wont, very hard upon this brave struggler against temptation; her intimacy with a man so notorious for his powers of fascination as Guy Leicester, having doubtless given rise to many of the rumours which were rife concerning her. He was still, notwithstanding the fact that in respect to her his relations are simply those of friendship, a frequent visitor to the "Shanty." He had accepted his defeat with a regret which was not altogether divested of palliation, for, alas! at an early period of his intimacy with the Denhams, Guy had been driven by stress of circumstances to borrow money of a man

(a fact unknown at that time to Guy), by whom the woman whose beauty and grace formed his own chief attraction to the "Shanty," was neglected and ill-treated. Richard Denham, whose ostensible business was stockbroking, was generally supposed to be a wealthy man, but on that score his debtor, after a short period, entertained misgivings. Hints, savouring of a desire for repayment, which, to a proud spirit such as Guy (in a certain sense) possessed, were terribly irritating, broke from time to time, and generally when, to borrow his own expression, the man "had spliced the main brace," from the business stockbroker's lips, and at such times Guy, fretted by the galling chain of debt, was troubled with a longing to escape to the uttermost parts of the earth, rather than enter the "Shanty's" doors again.

The sense of obligation embittered even the pleasure which he took in Gertrude Denham's society, for to pay either principal or interest was for him alike impossible; whilst her husband's familiarity, and vulgar airs of patronage towards himself were almost more than he could endure with patience. The present of a valuable bracelet (which, as I need not say, was bought "on tick") to Mrs Denham, lessened for a time his sense of disgust at the position in regard to his creditor in which he stood; could he, however, have even faintly surmised the injury which the bestowal of that gift, together with sundry others of an equally compromising description, would have wrought to Mrs Denham's reputation, he would, methinks, have endured with greater patience the mortifications

and annoyances which his own reckless course of folly and extravagance had entailed upon his head.

To Gertrude Denham, her enforced acceptance of those gifts had given pain unspeakable. Well aware was she not alone of the debt which Guy had incurred to her husband, but of the fact that the valuable trinkets, so fraudulently, in her opinion, obtained, were regarded by Richard Denham in the light of payment on account, for moneys owing.

“Not take the things!—I like that,” he had, in answer to his wife’s remonstrances, said angrily. “I hope he will fork out some more of Messrs Hanworth & Co.’s jewellery, for it seems little likely that I shall see any actual cash from our impecunious friend’s pockets. This is the result of being good-natured. Teaches one to be

on guard in future against such slippery chaps as your good-looking, soft-sawderring military men. Call themselves gentlemen, indeed! Fellows who haven't a rap that they can call their own;" and Mr Denham, wholly ignoring the circumstance that but for his possessing a charming and greatly to be pitied wife, he would have been, by "gentlemen," long ago universally tabooed as too "unmitigated a snob" for them to associate with, flung himself into the only comfortable arm-chair which the little drawing-room contained, and between two puffs of a strongly-perfumed cigar, desired his wife to invite on the following day "that swindling chap" Leycester to dinner.

The day on which for the first time Mrs Denham is introduced in person to the reader, preceded by about a month the

eventful one when Mrs Durant, the half distracted mother of a prodigal young soldier son, was seized with serious illness at the "Dragon" Hotel, Broadmere. On that occasion she, as has already been chronicled, was removed, at the suggestion of Guy Leycester, to the "villa residence" of the Denhams, the impecunious Captain's obligations to Mr Denham being in a great degree, and infinitely to his debtor's satisfaction, wiped away by the tolerably high rent, paid, *sub rosa*, by Rowley Elphinstone for the suffering widow's benefit.

But, seeing that I am anxious to do full justice to the character of a woman of whom it might be truly said, that she was far more sinned against than sinning, I will — before following the regular course of my story—venture

to devote a small portion of my space to the dialogue between Guy Leycester and the woman whose love he had once eagerly desired to win. The latter had, as the reader may possibly remember, greeted the former aspirant for her favour with an exordium in which she bitterly excused herself for the worse than folly in that she, at the mature age of thirty-seven, felt that a warm and tender heart was still throbbing in her breast. "It is so stupid," she said, "if not absolutely revolting, to feel young when one is old." And Guy, in his chivalrous haste to justify her in her own eyes, took in his own the slender hand that rested on the arm of her chair, and pressed it lightly to his lips.

"What nonsense!" he said. "You are one of the women, of whom there are

so few, who will always be young. You are kind and good, patient and uncomplaining, whilst, for your own welfare, and that of others also, possibly, yours is not one of those passionately emotional natures which, like the sword wearing out the scabbard, produce so terribly wearing an effect both upon a woman's looks and spirits."

Poor Gertrude! How little did the utterer of those coldly-sympathising words suspect that in the veins of the woman beside him, a very storm of crushed-down emotion was at that moment raging. In the allusion which she had made to her age, she had spoken quite spontaneously, and without any thought of the possible consequences of her self-abnegation; and the thrill of passionate feeling which at the touch

of Guy's lips ran through every fibre of her frame, condemned her in her own sight as a guilty and a shameless woman. She had scarcely realised till now how dear to her heart was this unprincipled and dangerously-attractive man; so dear indeed was he, that she in her heart of hearts, and notwithstanding her strong resolve to act uprightly, found herself (and that to her own alarm) bitterly regretting the misconceptions regarding her temperament and proclivities which her conduct towards himself had given birth to in Guy Leicester's mind. Happily, however, for her future peace of conscience, her companion---by whom the vivid blush which mantled the perfect oval of her face passed unnoticed, spoke again, and the quiet tones of his voice, the voice of a

man whose love for her was dead—recalled her to herself, and stilled the tumult which had begun to surge within her breast.

“This is the first opportunity,” he said, “that I have been able to find of telling you how awfully I regret having troubled you with that bracelet. You understand it all, I know, and will forgive me for having made use of this only method which I could devise of paying off a portion of this accursed—I beg your pardon for the word—debt which I have incurred to Mr Denham.”

“Yes, I know—I understand,” she, in a faltering voice, rejoined. “The sense of obligation to him must be one which you feel acutely. I told you in my note that I could not help myself. *He* would not allow me to send it back,

and I only hope that he will not force me to wear it."

"I am not without a suspicion," laughed Guy, "that he will dispose of the wretched thing in Paris. He hinted to me—one of those horrible hints which will some day drive me to self-murder—that he has important business in Paris, only 'want of tin, old fellow,' he said (and oh, Mrs Denham, you have heard the kind of thing before, and I am sure must pity me), 'keeps me boxed up here.' Is it not an awful grind? The worst punishment, upon my soul, that my sins have ever brought down upon my head, is that of owing money to such a man as Denham."

"I know—it is very sad, very hard to bear; but I ought not to forget, and how I wish I could, that the man who acts

with so little delicacy towards you is my husband! But, Guy—Captain Ley-ester, I mean—”

“No! Call me Guy. It sounds so kind and sisterly.”

“Well then, Guy, and ‘dear Guy,’ if you will, for you know that I have your best interests at heart, will you try—I know that it is difficult—to refrain from abusing him to me? It is my duty not to listen to you.”

“I don’t see that at all. We are both sufferers from the same cause, and, judging from my own feelings, it must be a satisfaction to you to hear me speak my mind. However, I can for the moment spare you from any more struggles between duty and disinclination, for I am off to London on business of a painful nature, to wit, renewing an overdue

bill—I have a few Jews to deal with, but, by Jove! I prefer this one, all the same, to one Christian creditor we wot of. You shake your head. Well, I daresay I am wrong, I generally am, you know, but you will wish me God speed, will not you?—on my odious errand.”

“Indeed I will—of that you may be sure,” Mrs Denham, who with difficulty restrains her tears, replies. “You have no more sincere well-wisher than I, who am so powerless to in any way assist you.”

Then Guy, with a conscience which sorely reproaches him for the injury which his evil deeds have already done to a friend so self-sacrificing and true, hurries, with a silent pressure of her hand, from the room and from the house.



CHAPTER VII.

AN UNEQUAL MATCH.

IT so happened that at the luncheon hour of the day on which Guy's sin in regard to May Durant had found him out, the conversation at the mess table turned almost entirely, as was indeed not surprising, on the Royalty Square Robbery. The fact that it was committed on the day of the Colonel's dinner-party, was not a little commented on, and much good-humoured chaff was sent flying about on the occasion.

“Does anyone remember who was the first of our fellows to leave?” asked young Cardew, who was rather proud of his skill in the noble art of tormenting.

“Couldn’t say,” remarked another young fellow. “I only know that I was not the last. If those deuced clever boobies, the police-detectives, try to bring the theft home to one of us, I shall plead impecuniosity, and impending bankruptcy, as being slightly in favour of my innocence.”

“Whilst I,” said the first speaker, whose father was an Earl and Lord Lieutenant of his county—“am willing to take my Bible oath that I was never in a pop shop in my life.”

“If I remember rightly,” said Leicester, who during the perpetration of these would-be lively jokes had remained silent, and apparently absorbed in thought,

“you, Major Brereton, left the Colonel’s house at a rather remarkably early hour. Perhaps you can tell us whether you at that time saw any suspicious-looking persons loitering about the passages. One person, it seems, gives a wonderfully clear account of where the diamonds were left. That person little thought, of course, that anyone would have the audacity to take them from the table on which they had been placed.”

Major Brereton had paid no apparent heed to the question addressed to him by Guy, his attention being, to all appearance, absorbed in the act of peeling and cutting in pieces the orange which was on the plate before him. Captain Leycester had, however, no intention of allowing the man who was, he felt morally certain, implicated in a ne-

farious scheme, to escape, if he (Guy) had the power to prevent it, from any of the consequences of his wickedness. On the subject of the diamond robbery, the Major should—Leycester was determined—be forced to commit himself by giving voice to an opinion.

“It appears,” he said, “from one person’s account, that the careless laying down of the jewel-cases took place very shortly before the guests were expected. The time, therefore, which must have elapsed between the doing so, and your departure, Major, must have been very short.”

“You are perhaps not aware,” interrupted Brereton, who at this *quasi* implication had become very red in the face, whilst his voice sounded harsh and hard, “that there are two ways of

leaving Sir Wilfred's house. There is the one through the inner hall, which leads, I imagine, to the downstairs servants' rooms; and there is another namely the one through the vestibule, which I took that evening. Someone well acquainted with the house probably planned the robbery. According to the police, this description of theft is almost always to be traced to discharged servants."

Now it was to the last degree improbable that the actual words of the well-known French aphorism of *qui s'excuse s'accuse* should at that moment have flashed across the brains of any one of the men present on this occasion; nevertheless, there was a prevailing feeling amongst the listeners that the words of the unpopular Major implied a cer-

tain desire to exonerate himself from a latent and invidious charge. A silence, which was felt by everyone to be awkward and uncomfortable, followed, and remained unbroken till Leicester, still speaking in the tone which had struck those present as what may be called playfully aggressive, said,—

“I wonder how many of us will be subpoenaed as witnesses. If I am one of them, I shall certainly put in a good word for Ma’m selle Augustine. She is a jolly little thing, and knows no more, I am convinced, about the robbery than you or I do, Major.”

The slightly bantering tone in which the words were said, was so at variance with Guy Leicester’s usual demeanour towards the superior officer, who, as it was well known, he greatly disliked,

that the wonder at what was passing grew stronger; nor was it decreased when Guy said quietly,—

“I have a fancy that I shouldn’t make a bad detective. The idea about a woman being at the bottom of everything isn’t half a bad one, and, in this case, I should certainly act upon it.”

“Why, you don’t mean to say,” began Dicky Dollars, “that you think Miss—”

“My dear boy,” broke in Guy, “you are forgetting one of the most important of our unwritten laws. Ladies’ names are to be held sacred from even an allusion to them. A good rule—don’t you think so, Major? If you have anything to say against it, now is your time.”

There was no mistake about the

matter now. Provocation on the part of Guy was, in the opinion of everyone who had heard his words, and noticed the unconcealed insolence of his manner, clearly intended; it occasioned, therefore, some surprise that Major Brereton, instead of indulging in an angry outbreak, said, in a manner which, in its well-guarded calm, had in it something of dignity,—

“I am at a loss to understand your meaning, Captain Leycester, or to comprehend why I am supposed capable of differing from a rule which I should imagine every gentleman must agree in thinking an excellent one. As regards this mysterious robbery, too, you are pleased to adopt a tone which I cannot but think peculiar, and as I should feel glad to be enlightened as to your

meaning, perhaps you will do me the favour to come, after mess this evening, to my room. The subject is not a pleasant one," he added, rising from his chair, and taking his forage cap from the side-table, "but if you imagine I can assist the authorities in throwing a light upon it, I shall be happy to do my best in the matter."

"What the deuce does the man mean?" was the question which, by not a few tongues, and by some inquiring eyes, was asked, when Major Brereton, pale to the lips with suppressed passion, had left the room.

"God knows!" Leycester carelessly responded. "The man has got diamonds on his stupid brain, I think. However, I must go, I suppose, at the time he names, and hear what he has to say.

In the meanwhile, who," inquired this incorrigible gambler, "is for a go at nap or poker?"

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Guy Leycester had, on the whole, rather enjoyed the preliminary passage-at-arms with his superior officer which had taken place. He would, he told himself, greatly amuse the ladies at Ivy Cottage by the idea, one which he would declare was gaining ground, that more than one of the officers was likely to be "run in" by the police, as being implicated in the robbery of Lady Gregorie's diamonds. He was, in short, when he reached the cottage, in more than usually high spirits, and consequently was but ill-prepared for the sight of Mrs Durant's agitated face, and for the dignity of manner with which she

gave him to understand that his hopes of seeing May would, on this occasion, be, by her mother's wish and will, rendered abortive. That the coming interview would be both a serious and a trying one, he shrewdly suspected; nor did Mrs Durant long delay the moment when his worst fears would be realised. The deadly peril in which her darling stood had kindled within her gentle breast an amount of anger which those who knew her best would have believed her incapable of feeling, and it is with eyes which were almost literally aflame with wrath, that she, without any preliminary remark, said,—

“Captain Leycester, how is it that you can dare to look me in the face? Did you think that I had no heart,—no courage? Or did you hope that I should

always remain so blind and stupid as not to see how cruelly and wickedly you have been tampering with the happiness of my child?"

Leycester was struck, for the moment, speechless. They were alone, those two, in the pretty, sheltered garden in which he has so often strolled, unreprieved by this now indignant parent, and where he had realised for the first time, and to the full, the happiness of a pure as well as a passionate love. This species of *solitude à deux* had been very sweet to him then, and in days gone by the sound of an approaching footfall would have stirred him to such exceeding wrath that it would only have been by a vigorous effort of self-repression that he could have refrained from uttering aloud the "strong language" which would

have been on the tip of his tongue to speak. But things were altered now, and he—the bold and self-reliant soldier, the “Lion amongst the ladies,” who had so long, “rejoicing in his strength”—trod his triumphant way, stood disarmed, and all but trembling, before one frail, defenceless woman, the while he would have gladly given a year of his ill-spent, worthless life for the sudden appearance on the battle-ground of even a child, whose presence on the scene might prove a welcome hindrance to the ordeal which he was suddenly called upon to undergo. Escape, however, from the punishment which his own acts of self-indulgence had entailed upon him was impossible: reply to Mrs Durant’s exordium he must, but it was in a voice which almost faltered that he said,—

“How hardly you think of me! but I am more sorry than surprised. Still—you, *her* mother, you who so well know how beautiful, how perfect in every way she is, might see in the great love I bear to your sweet May some shadow of excuse for conduct which you blame so angrily. I have made no attempt to hide my feelings. From the moment when my eyes first rested on May’s lovely face, a deeper, truer love than I had ever felt before seemed to wake up in my heart, and—oh! why did you not then, whilst the evil—if so you deem it, was only beginning, nip it in the bud? I should have been the only sufferer then—”

“Whereas *now* it is my child,—my innocent darling, who, before she knew you, scarcely understood the meaning of

the fatal word—*love*, who is made the sacrifice to your selfishness, your unprincipled disregard of the consequences to her future life, of your wrong-doing; and, oh, Captain Leycester, it is both cowardly and cruel on your part to lay the blame of all this misery upon me! I saw, of course, that you admired my child, but until I had spoken to her—”

“Oh, then you have talked to May of this! And she has told you, doubtless, for she is the soul of truth—that I have been so happy as to gain her love?”

“Yes, I have learned thus much from the lips which, as you justly say, cannot lie, but which nevertheless have been taught by you that in the deception of silence there is no sin. There is for you no possible excuse. You have taken advan-

tage of my liking,—my gratitude towards you for bygone acts of kindness, to worm your way into the affections of a young girl, a child almost, both in age and experience, and whilst exacting from her a promise of secrecy, you were perfectly well aware that for you, marriage with a penniless girl was to the last degree impossible—”

“For the present—Yes,” he, after a pause, rejoined; “but, poor in purse as I am at present—”

“And loaded with debt—”

“And loaded, as you truly say, with debt, there may be a good time coming for me. I have a rich old uncle, a bachelor, who I feel certain would—if he saw on my part symptoms of a real intention to (as he phrases it) ‘reform,’ help me on in life. If you would only

sanction my engagement to May, I would write to my uncle—”

“But I cannot sanction it! Oh, Captain Leycester,” exclaimed the already softened woman, as she sank upon a garden bench, and betrayed by the emotion which she strove in vain to conceal, the fact that her interlocutor had not in her case lost the gift of fascination which by women in general was found so irresistible—“Oh, Captain Leycester, I could not — even if there were no other reasons against the plan which you propose — give my daughter to a gambler.”

“Ah!” he retorted bitterly. “So you have been told of this sin also, amongst the pleasant ones which have been brought up in array against me. Yes, I own that I have played—not from love

of excitement, but in the hope sometimes of—well releasing myself from some pressing difficulty. I am not a hardened gamester, and if a hope were held out to me— Dear Mrs Durant, do, I entreat you, try to think kindly of my follies. If I had had a mother such as you, I should have been a better man,—one less utterly unworthy—as you now, and that justly, consider me to be, of a sweet and pure girl's love. If you will only believe that it is not too late, and that with a little hope to live upon I could be a different being—if you would believe in my sincere repentance, and in my deep sorrow for having deceived you—”

“Oh! what is *your* deception,” the poor mother, clasping almost convulsively her thin hands together, said, “that I should not forgive it? Your sin against me is

that you have taught cunning and trickery to my child. Oh, it is too hard—too cruel! Never before has she had a thought—a wish, concealed from me. I have been so tender—so indulgent, that, ah me! she might, and would, but for you, have trusted me. No, for the wickedness of teaching my darling, my sweet May-blossom, to mistrust and deceive her mother, I do not, and I never can, forgive you.”

“As you will,” Guy said despondingly. “It is in your power to make us both miserable, but I did not think that it was in you to be so hard.”

“I am not hard, God help me!” exclaimed the widow, “but my duty towards my fatherless child compels me to be firm. You were so good in the early days, Captain Leycester, both to

me and to my boy, that it pains me to say that your visits here must cease."

"But," interrupted Guy, "I may be allowed to see May once more,—to bid her good-bye,—to promise—"

"No, no; that cannot be. She must not even see you go. There is a way by the farm stables which I will show you; and I will tell May that it is for her good and happiness that I do this thing. Come quickly, and save her, poor child, the bitter pain of parting."

The words had scarcely left her lips when another figure appeared upon the scene, the figure of a tall, slight girl, golden-haired, and with her large blue eyes, glancing with a look of eager inquiry, now at her lover's excited countenance, and again at the agitated and tearful one of his companion. Guy was

the first to break the silence which followed on the entrance, by the door-window, of his sweetheart.

“May, my darling,” he said, “come to my aid. Try and persuade your mother that she will not do well to part us. Tell her—”

“Captain Leycester,” broke in Mrs Durant, and her voice sounded to her daughter’s ears very strange and harsh, “nothing that May can say has the power to alter my decision. I speak in the name of her dead father, and by the authority which he delegated to me, I say to you, his child,” resting, as she spoke, her shaking hand upon her daughter’s arm, “that you must give up this man. All must henceforth be over between you.”

“But, mother,” pleaded May, whilst

a blush, which was almost painful in its intensity, surged suddenly over her face and throat, "I know—I quite understand that we—that Guy, I mean, can never ask me to be his wife, but why should we, for that reason, be made unhappy? We would never talk—would we, Guy?" looking up with burning cheeks and wistful eyes into her sweetheart's moody face, "of love again. Only let him come as usual, mother, and I will never, whilst I live, have a secret from you again."

During this simple yet passionate appeal, Guy Leycester had seemed absorbed in the process of digging, with the ferrule of his walking-stick, a self-sown weed from out the gravel walk on which he stood. His eyes, when he did raise them, were fixed on May,

who, too much absorbed by her own troubles to notice the growing pallor of her mother's face, was painfully startled when Mrs Durant, leaning helplessly forward, clutched at Guy's arm to save herself from falling.

"Let us go indoors, May," she faltered; "this trial has been too much for me," and having so said, she quietly fainted away in the arms of the stalwart soldier with whom she had been doing fierce battle—poor weak mother—for the right.





CHAPTER VIII.

MAY DURANT CRIES "*MEA CULPA*."

TO carry the unconscious woman up a short flight of stairs to her own bedroom, was for Guy an easy task. The widow was of small stature, and, even when in health, slight and delicate of frame. Since her illness she had more than once alarmed her daughters by attacks of faintness similar to that by which she was now seized. May was therefore, although greatly distressed, not wholly taken by surprise when Leicester, supporting

the fragile form upon his arm, said hurriedly,—

“I can carry her: should she not be taken to her room? She is so light, poor thing, and I could carry double her weight with ease.”

May, who had been chafing her mother's cold hands in hers, gladly agreed to her lover's proposal.

“Oh, yes, dear Guy,” she cried. “You can help us! Poor darling mother! Her room is not far away, and once quietly on her bed, she will soon recover.”

Whilst she was yet speaking, he had lifted his burden as easily as though she had been a child, and, guided by May, speedily found himself in a pretty apartment, which, limited as was the accommodation which the *quasi* farm-

house afforded, was held sacred by Mrs Durant's daughters to her use alone.

"Shall I go at once for Brathwaite?" whispered Guy, who being totally unused to the witnessing of illness in any form, drew direful conclusions from the sight of Mrs Durant's deathlike pallor.

May, who was already busily employed in administering restoratives, eagerly declined the offer.

"It is nothing to be alarmed at," she said. "It is agitation and over excitement that have made her ill; and oh—" she, with a flood of self-reproachful tears, continued, "it is all my fault! Poor mother! I feel now how wicked I have been! But, Guy," she whispered in alarm (for Mrs Durant was beginning to show signs of return-

ing consciousness) “she must not see you here. Go,” almost, in her haste, pushing him from the door. “I will come and tell you when she is better;” and then, greatly to her relief, he left her to her ministrations.

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 Thirty minutes elapsed — minutes, which to Guy, in his anxiety and suspense, seemed lengthening into hours, before May, looking very pale and troubled, came, according to her promise, with news of the invalid.

“She is better,” the girl said, “but oh! so weak and sorrowful! I would not let her say a word about the—the—past; and she promised that she would try to sleep. She thinks, poor darling, that you have left the house; so, Guy, dear, you must go at once. I cannot

deceive her any more, especially now, when she is so weak and ill. She understands too—I am quite sure she does—that I have made her a promise to—give you up, and whilst she trusts me so entirely how can I again be false to her?"

"But, May, my darling, you have surely made no such promise?" Guy eagerly exclaimed, and as he spoke he strove to draw her towards him, and kissed, not for the first time, the sweet lips, whose carnation hue had faded since last he had pressed them with his own. But the girl held back from his embrace.

"Dear Guy," she said, and her voice sounded to his ears very sad and changed, "I have, in my heart, promised—and my mother feels that so it is—never to act again ungratefully

and slyly. From henceforth there shall be no concealments on my part from my mother."

"I do not understand you!" Guy, with an angry light in his eyes, exclaimed. "Do you renounce my love, and would you have me believe that, after giving me yours, you can so readily, and in one short hour, take it back?"

"No, no, I cannot. Do not think it. Before my mother spoke to you, I told her that I loved you, that I should never change, that all I cared for was to go on as we have been going on—seeing each other so happily! For we were happy, were we not, Guy?" she asked, and looking the while with such a winning wistfulness into his eyes that her lover for the moment lost his head and, abruptly clasping her closely in his arms,

pressed passionate kisses, not on her lips alone, but on her shining hair, and on the soft white pillar of her girlish throat.

She was terribly frightened; an awful fear that he had gone suddenly mad possessed her, and with a scream, which was unmistakably the result of intense alarm, she tore herself from his embrace. For a second or two Guy's breath also well-nigh failed him for fear that May's cry might have reached her mother's ears, and then—but happily he was, to borrow a French expression, *quiete pour la peur*, and therefore all that remained for him to do was to quiet his sweetheart's fears, and endeavour to recover her (as he greatly feared) lost confidence.

"My poor little child," he said tenderly, "you must forgive me. I have not

been myself since the dread of losing you has been brought before me. Nay, darling, do not shrink from me : I will not offend again ; and if you will only say that you forgive me for my rough wooing, I will leave you now, trusting—may I not do so, dearest ?—that you will plead our cause, and spare me the misery of too severe a banishment.”

May had by this time in a great degree recovered her composure, and was even ready to take blame to herself for her folly in that so loud a scream had escaped her lips.

“I must have grown very selfish,” she said, “or I should have thought of poor mother, and how frightened she would have been if she had heard me ; but, Guy, dear, you will go now, for my sake stay no longer. Your being

still in the house makes me feel so dreadfully false and guilty."

Guy, before making any reply to this reiterated entreaty, looked at his watch, and, startled by the lateness of the hour, took up his hat and stick, saying as he did so,—

"I am going, my darling, but you must not imagine, nor must you allow your mother to hope, that she has seen the last of me. You have twined yourself too closely round my heart's chords for me to live without you now. But, in the meantime, you shall not be tormented either with my presence or my kisses. I have been a fool to love you so madly, but the deed is done, and I ought, but cannot, accept the consequences."

They were his last words, and almost

before the agitated girl had realised the fact that he had left her, she heard the house-door close behind him. For a few moments she stood like one stupefied, and then slowly and very sadly she stole to her mother's room, and listening outside the door, strove to ascertain whether or not the sufferer slept.

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Now, seeing that Captain Leycester is the hero ostensibly of this veracious story, I record with regret the fact that his reflections as he wended his way barrackwards were of an almost entirely egotistical character. The consequences to *himself* of Mrs Durant's untoward intervention chiefly occupied his mind; the only too probable results to poor May of his reckless and unprincipled

conduct never having, as yet, in the slightest degree come home to him. And yet he loved her—truly as well as passionately, and with what might be deemed (taking into account the manner of man he was) with a pure and not wholly sensual love. The idea of giving her up was one which he could not bring himself for a single moment to entertain, and so entirely did sundry projects for carrying out his wishes take possession of his thoughts, that it was not until the sight of Major Brereton's sullen face at the mess dinner reminded him of that gentleman's existence, that speculations regarding the outcome of his approaching interview with his superior officer flashed across his brain.

The first to leave the unusually dull

messroom dinner was the *bête noire* of the regiment, and his absence was felt by all present as an immediate relief from *gêne*.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Captain Elphinstone, whose approaching marriage rendered his presence at the mess dinners a circumstance of rather rare occurrence, “what a nuisance that sort of fellow is. And he is the sort that will stick, too, I am afraid. A chap with a skin as thick as that of a rhinoceros, is deuced difficult to get rid of.”

“Think so?” said Guy Leycester carelessly, adding, as he plucked a second grape from the portion to which he had helped himself,—“Now I don’t exactly agree with you. At least, if he does, as you say, stick, it won’t

be for want of my doing my best to make him loosen his hold."

"And you are going to have a go at him, I expect, to-night," suggested Lieutenant Cardew. "But I advise you to look out for squalls. The brute has a nasty temper.

"Thanks; I'll humour him; and that he mayn't have an excuse for getting his dander up, I won't keep him any longer waiting."

He left the messroom, after delivering himself of this—to his listeners—somewhat puzzling speech, and made his way to the field-officers' quarters, where, as he had expected, his adversary was ready to receive him. The words with which the latter greeted his visitor were not conciliatory.

"I can't understand, Captain Ley-

cester," he said, "what excuse you can give for your conduct this morning, but I am, nevertheless, willing to afford you an opportunity of offering me one."

"And supposing that I have no intention of making one, and have only this to say, that if you do not immediately take steps to leave the Regiment, I shall expose you to the world as one of the most infamous scoundrels that exists in it."

Leycester, as he thus candidly spoke his mind, looked his adversary calmly in the face. He expected, in response for his daring words, either a sudden blow, or a burst of furious invective. Neither, however, was forthcoming, and instead, Brereton's reply was not devoid of a quiet authority, as he said,—

"Before descending to any further

abuse, it would perhaps be as well to explain your reasons for this violent and inexcusable attack. Of what do you accuse me?"

"Of stealing Lady Gregorie's diamonds, and of—"

"Pardon me, you are going to fast. The jewel case which is missing from Sir Wilfred's house certainly contained an ornament which was given to me by a lady in return for a service which it was in my power to render her; and I confess myself at a loss to understand how this transaction can be construed into an act of fraud."

"You forget," said Guy, who was rapidly becoming dangerously angry, for the line of defence adopted by his antagonist had thrown him off his guard, "that I overheard your conversation with

Miss Vidal, and could swear to your having named the very sum for which you would part with the letters which you were base enough to retain. Oh! there is ample proof—”

“*Proof* indeed!” Brereton said contemptuously; “I like that! The word of an out-at-elbows gambler,—of a man who—”

But these were his last words. Before he could complete the sentence he had begun, the blood of a long line of stainless ancestry had surged up hotly into Guy Leycester’s brain, and his clenched hand was upraised to strike.

“Take that, you infernal liar!” he exclaimed; and then a heavy blow, dealt right between the eyes, felled Louis Brereton to the ground, and there—like

one dead, with the blood streaming from his face—he lay.

Guy's first impulse, and it was one which, happily, on all accounts, he did not hesitate to obey, was to ring the bell; and then, with a feeling of intense self anger, he knelt beside the inanimate form of his superior officer, and, raising the head of his victim, endeavoured to ascertain the extent of the injury that he had inflicted.

To his dismay, he discovered that the damage done was greater than he had imagined it to be, for in falling, the Major, who was a heavy man, and had been hit standing, had struck his head against the solid pediment of a card-table, and blood, in no small quantity, was oozing from the wound.

“Run, as quick as you can go, for

Dr Brathwaite!" Leycester cried to the soldier servant, when that functionary opened the door of the room, and stood aghast at the spectacle which met his eyes. "Don't be an hour, you fool! Say the Major has had a fall, and that the doctor must come at once!"

Left alone with the unconscious man, Guy could do nothing, after searching in vain for brandy or any other possible restorative, but reproach himself bitterly for the folly which he had committed. He had, ever since the conversation between Miss Vidal and the Major which he had happened to overhear, been determined to obtain, if possible, for Lady Gregorie, the restitution of her letters: on the day following the famous dinner-party he had called at

Royalty Square, and had seen, or at least imagined that he had done so, a something of renewed brightness in the expression of his hostess's face, which led him to believe that the cause of her uneasiness was removed. The mysterious disappearance of the diamonds, coupled with the extremely bad opinion which he had, with reason, formed of Brereton, and the fact that the cloud of anxiety no longer hovered over Lady Gregorie's fair brow, wrought in Guy's mind the conviction that the purloiner of the jewels was no other than the Major himself. That such a man should remain, to the disgrace of the regiment, in the Chalkshire Rifles, was an anomaly to which Guy did not feel inclined to submit, and therefore he resolved to place before the culprit the

choice between exposure of his conduct, and the sending in, without explanation on his part, of his papers. What was the result of this proceeding we already know—Major Brereton lay stunned and apparently lifeless on the floor; and the chances of keeping Lady Gregorie's name from being mixed up in the affair were reduced, to Guy's extreme regret, to a minimum.

“Oh, here you are at last, Brathwaite! Thank God, you've come! I couldn't have stood the suspense much longer. Now see, will you, whether I've killed that man or not?”

Guy pointed, as he spoke, to the spot, half hidden by a table, on which lay, as yet unperceived by the newcomer, a human form, in what appeared to be the immobility of death. In

another moment the doctor was at work, nor was it long before he was enabled to give an answer to Captain Leycester's question.

"It's a nasty crack at the back of the head, but he'll get over it, never fear. Why, man! you must have given him a blow that would have felled an ox. The Major will have two black eyes, I reckon, for a month to come."

They had between them lifted the injured man on a camp bed, and the doctor was busily engaged in cutting away the short rings of hair from the wounded head, when Guy suddenly exclaimed,—

"I must be off now, Doctor, to the Colonel. I suppose he will put me under arrest; but that is but a small portion of the annoyance this act of

mine will cause. I can do you no good here."

"That's true enough; but you can send an ambulance at once, for we must get him to the hospital without delay. Yes, you had better be off, for he will be opening his eyes presently, and I shouldn't say that the poor fellow would be exactly overjoyed at seeing your face so soon again."





CHAPTER IX.

EM PROVES HERSELF A FRIEND INDEED.

THE news, greatly exaggerated, of course, of Captain Leycester's assault on the Major, spread like wildfire through the town and barracks. On the following morning, long before Guy could obtain speech of Sir Wilfred, the latter had been credibly informed that Major Brereton was dead, and that Captain Leycester, the officer by whom he had been "assassinated," had "made his escape." Without putting anything like entire faith in this very

improbable story, the Colonel, having ascertained that there existed some foundation for the report, felt not a little uneasy in his mind. Private business had, early in the day after the occurrence, taken him into the town, and on his return home he had been greeted by the intelligence that Captain Leycester had, during his absence, called upon him twice.

“And, dear Wilfred,” exclaimed Lady Gregorie, who had been impatiently waiting her husband’s return, “I am sure he has come to explain everything satisfactorily. Mr Cardew, who has been here, told me that Major Brereton is really not very much hurt. Captain Leycester, it is supposed, knocked him down.”

“And you consider that satisfactory,

do you? I do not, let me tell you; and he will have to be put under arrest."

"Under arrest! Oh, Wilfred! And there is the bell again! Now do not, pray, be hard upon him," she, as her husband was leaving the room, added; but he took no notice of her appeal, leaving her to meditate tremblingly on the possible consequences to herself which, from Guy's rash interposition, might arise.

Meanwhile the "satisfactory account" of the transaction to which the sanguine nature of Florence had caused her to allude, was clearly not yet forthcoming.

"We had a row, Colonel," Guy, in answer to Sir Wilfred's questions, said calmly. "The fellow was insolent, and I lost my temper. I plead guilty to knocking him down, and I don't believe there is a man in the regiment

who would not have done the same thing."

"Very likely ; the fellow is a cad, and doubtless deserved what he got ; but the row must have had a beginning, and, from what I hear, something that was said about those damned jewels set the ball a-rolling. There was a talk, was there not, at mess about them ?"

"Yes ; but nothing of any consequence was said. There was some stupid chaffing amongst the youngsters, and Major Brereton, who does not seem able to understand a joke, asked me, before he left, to come to his room—which I did."

"And you then and there knocked him down ! Now, Leycester, I ask you, as a man not wholly devoid of common sense, whether you expect me to believe this ? I can't, of course, force you to

say what passed, but you would, I think, do wisely to reflect that at the Court-martial which, as you are aware, must follow on this business, you will be obliged to reveal the entire facts. It is my duty, as you must also know, to place you under arrest."

"Certainly, Colonel, and I shall await your further orders in my barrack-room. In the meantime, I am expecting an answer from the Horse Guards relative to an offer on my part to join the troops in the Soudan."

"Really! Well, we shall be sorry to lose you, but that fine fellow Gordon has need of every good soldier we can send out to him. So," he, after a rather lengthened pause, continued, "you have nothing more to say, have you, Leycester, about this stupid quarrel of yours?"

“Nothing, sir,” answered Guy, as he rose from the chair on which Sir Wilfred had on his entrance motioned him to be seated, “excepting that I thank you for your kind consideration, and would gladly, if I could, obey you in this matter.”

After the departure of his contumacious subordinate, Sir Wilfred remained during many minutes plunged in extremely puzzling reflections. He entertained no doubt whatever that the quarrel between the two officers had for its cause the robbery of his wife’s jewels; and almost equally certain did he feel that Leycester believed the thief to be no other than the man on whom he had inflicted condign and possibly well-merited punishment. As regarded Guy’s obstinate reticence on the subject, the

Colonel, knowing well the chivalrous nature of the ne'er-do-weel, could only account for it by the supposition that a woman's name was implicated in the affair. It was probably only an exemplification of the old adage,—*Cherchez la femme*, etc., etc.; but then—and during a passing moment Sir Wilfred's heart almost ceased to beat, for, who, he asked himself, was the woman? And where was she to be sought? In that fearful moment there darted through his brain the memory of his wife's sudden pallor when Augustine, rushing into the room, proclaimed the fact that the jewels were not in their accustomed place; and besides these there were other, and equally suggestive, facts which, now that suspicion had once found an opening in the husband's normally trustful mind, came

crowding in—most unwelcome visitors, through the aperture. And yet, strongly corroborative of Lady Gregorie's previous acquaintance with Brereton as were some of Sir Wilfred's unearthed reminiscences, he could not bring himself to associate her with a single unworthy thought or act. She had probably, supposing his vague surmises to have been correct, been in all likelihood screening some other woman (and who could say that the woman in question was not Emily Vidal?) from exposure and from disgrace. The doing so was, he told himself, an act which was eminently characteristic of his wife's generous and impulsive temperament. She was, however, incapable, as he fondly believed, of systematic deception, and at a word from him, she would, he felt certain, disclose the

truth. In the meantime, the thought that another man — *preux chevalier* albeit that other might be—was keeping watch and ward over his wife's good name, was as gall and wormwood to this high-hearted soldier, and the expression of his face as he re-entered his wife's presence, was ill calculated to re-assure and give her courage.

Since he had left her, she had moved neither hand nor foot, but had sat, as one paralysed by a great dread, on the couch whence she had risen to plead with her husband for the man who had, as she felt well convinced, sinned from generous motives in her cause. That Guy Leicester would breathe no word capable of implicating her in this dark business, she was as certain as of the fact that she, the most miserable of women,

was awaiting in horrible inaction her coming doom. It was the loss of her husband's love and trust that she, without any inward comment as to how that loss was to be brought about, vaguely dreaded; for her own devotion, strong and entire although it was—did not, as we already know, suffice to cast out fear, and the thought of confronting him in his wrath, crushed down to its very depths such spirit as she possessed. To her he had hitherto been (stern and severe as to others he was said to be) gentleness itself, and a change from that gentleness to words of anger and suspicion would be to her as a sentence of death.

Her suspense was not of long duration, but short as had been Guy's interview with his Colonel, the time had seemed endless to her. At length the sound of

hastily-approaching footsteps smote upon her ears, and as he entered, she, looking up into a face which troubled thoughts had rendered stern, became at once convinced that the moment she had so long dreaded was at hand, and that the signal for her well-merited punishment had struck. Her husband's voice as he addressed her, had, as she too truly felt, lost its accustomed ring, and it was with a rapidly-beating heart that she listened to his opening words.

“Florence,” he said—not unkindly, but in a tone of unwonted seriousness,—“I have lately both seen and heard much which I fail to understand, and I have come to you with the hope that you will be able to make these matters clear to me. Circumstances, which it is not necessary to explain, have compelled me

to suspect that before Major Brereton joined the regiment you had had some previous acquaintance with him, and that you were therefore not wholly unaware of the fact that his character as a gentleman and a man of honour did not stand especially high. I need not tell you," he continued, and but for the thick moustache which concealed the working of his features, Florence would have perceived that the lip of the proud and sensitive soldier literally trembled with emotion, "that the mere thought of your having a secret knowledge of this fellow is to the last degree distasteful to me; nor can I bring myself to believe for a single moment that your name will ever be mentioned in connection with—with a meeting between Captain Leycester and Major Brereton which has

just taken place, and may unfortunately lead to serious consequences. I am equally convinced that a probable concealment of facts is all with which I shall have to reproach you, and that if there should have been wrong-doing, the fault has not been yours, but that of another, whose guilt you have, from kindly motives, endeavoured to conceal. Am I right, dear?" he, in a softer tone, added, "and will you in this affair come—if you can—to my assistance?"

Poor Florence! Now was the moment, could she but have realised the truth, to have thrown herself upon her husband's mercy, and confessed to him, not only her girlish folly, but the share which she had had in bribing her enemy to silence. The knowledge that she had been more weak than wicked, more sinned against

than sinning, ought to have given her courage; but her dread of incurring her husband's displeasure—or what to her would have been a still heavier calamity—the loss of his love and trust, held her tongue tied: so paralyzing, indeed, was the effect upon her nerves of this agonising fear that, but for the opportune entrance of Emily Vidal, she would, despite the innate truthfulness of her nature, have given utterance to so direct and compromising a denial of facts that she could never again hope to be, by her husband at least, believed.

Em, who had by this time become acquainted with the passage-at-arms which between Guy and his superior officer had taken place, approached the room with an air of jauntiness and *insouciance* which was strongly at variance

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with her real feelings. For the first time since she had entered with Major Brereton upon what may be truly called a nefarious conspiracy, she began to be seriously alarmed for the possible consequences to herself of the misdeeds of which she had been guilty; and believing Lady Gregorie to be alone in the drawing-room, she (Em) was intruding on her friend's solitude for the purpose of again impressing upon the latter's mind the absolute necessity of denying all knowledge, whether in early or in later days, of the Major and his doings. Her purpose was to repeat once more the old arguments in favour of non-confession to Sir Wilfred of the follies of which his wife, in her early girlhood, had been guilty; but the plans of this dangerous counsellor were, at the sight of

the Colonel in his wife's room, suddenly changed. She took in the situation at a glance. Sir Wilfred, with true marital sternness, was questioning his wife as to her previous knowledge of Louis Brereton, whilst Florence, pale and trembling, was apparently on the verge of falling on her knees, and by confession making atonement for her sin. In a moment Em decided on her course of action. She would immolate herself, rather than her friend should suffer. She would throw herself on Sir Wilfred's generosity, would confess her fault, and denounce Major Brereton as the heartless villain by whom she had been ruined and betrayed.

As a first step in the performance of this little comedy, she, with a semi-tragic air, threw herself on the couch

beside Lady Gregorie, and, placing her arm round the agitated woman, exclaimed excitedly,—

“Darling Flo, compose yourself. You shall no longer suffer for my wrongdoing, for I have resolved that Sir Wilfred should, at last, learn the entire truth.” Then addressing the Colonel, she continued, with downcast eyes, and well-acted diffidence,—“It is a terrible thing, this revealing of my own bitter wrongs, but I have been so cruelly—so unpardonably, selfish, that no punishment can be too heavy for me. I have permitted my dearest friend to suffer for my sins, and this after her generous kindness in parting with her jewels, in order to screen my reputation from obloquy and shame.”

Sir Wilfred had, until now, listened apparently unmoved by Miss Vidal’s ex-

ordium, but at this point in her revelations he suddenly exclaimed,—

“Do you mean to tell me that Major Brereton is the thief? By heavens! if this is so, the affair must be looked into at once!”

And then, without taking any further heed either of his wife, who appeared on the point of fainting, or of the guest who had just played such a leading part in his domestic drama, Sir Wilfred left the two ladies to their reflections.





CHAPTER X.

NO PLACE FOR REPENTANCE.

WHEN Guy Leycester left the Colonel's house, many circumstances concurred to render him a most unhappy man. In the first place, he who prided himself on his soldier-like conduct and demeanour, had, by striking his superior officer, committed a breach of discipline, and shown himself thereby capable of conduct "unworthy of an officer and a gentleman." Whatever happened to "that brute Brereton" (for thus, in his rage at his own shortcomings, did

Guy mentally apostrophise his fallen foe), a Court-martial, generally a long and tedious affair, must of necessity take place; and there were cogent reasons, independently of his keen desire to strike a blow for Gordon, why seas should without delay roll between him and England. He had, under the heavy pressure of pecuniary embarrassments, applied to the Horse-Guards for leave to exchange into a regiment that was serving in the Soudan. The answer had been long in coming, and in the meantime, the "love at first sight," for such it might be truly called, which had entered into his heart for the beautiful maiden of seventeen whose affections he had won, had with such rapidity grown and strengthened that the mere sight of a big official letter from the War Office,

as the said letter, after his interview with Sir Wilfred, met his eyes, filled him with dismay unspeakable. For a moment or two the courage to ascertain without delay, his fate, utterly failed him. He felt, so contradictory were his wishes on the subject, positively bewildered; for whilst the desperate condition of his finances urged him to hope that his offer of taking service in the Soudan would be accepted, his passionate love for May Durant caused him to dread, even as might a possible sentence of death, the realisation of his, at one time, ardent desire. And, to do him only justice, it was not solely of himself that in this dire emergency he thought; the blow of separation, and of his departure to join the noble army of martyrs who were fighting their desperate way to rescue a

doomed Hero, would, he felt certain, be for May a terrible one; and it was this belief which, for a passing second or two, actually unnerved the man who had more than once faced, without the quickening of a single pulse, the dangers of a battle-field.

At length, and with a strong effort of will, he tore open the letter which bore on its broad face the to him ominous words, "On Her Majesty's Service," and then suspense was over, and the "worst," as he (being just then well inclined to give up "all for love") considered it, stared him in the face. Happily his was not a despondent nature, and so after half-an-hour or thereabouts, during which time he indulged in very sorrowful lucubrations, he came almost to the conclusion that

possibly good might spring out of the evil which had at first appeared so great. He would, provided always that he escaped the dangers of war and fever, obtain *kudos* during the Soudanese campaign, and consequently promotion. "Success," he reminded himself, was generally the "reward of the successful;" and if he could only make a good beginning, and follow up that beginning by keeping well to the front, he might, he thought, eventually look forward to the attainment of the rich reward he coveted, the reward, namely, of Mary Durant's hand in marriage.

The satisfaction, however, which this view of the situation afforded him, was not of long duration. The heart of his lovely May was not, as full well he knew, the only one which in a woman's

breast would throb with pain when the news came that he was by his own desire destined to share the dangers of the inglorious war which was then raging in the Soudan. Gertrude Denham—strive as she would to conceal from the man she loved the fact that to resist and to treat him coldly had been for her a triumph over human passion which only a strong sense of duty had enabled her to achieve—had nevertheless not quite succeeded in extinguishing his belief that, in what he considered to be her cold and highly unsatisfactory fashion, she was “fond” of him. To give pain to any woman, especially when that woman chanced to be one to whom he had once made love, was a task from the performance of which Guy’s kindly nature shrank, and he justly surmised

Gertrude Denham would probably—seeing that she was destitute of *home* happiness and comfort—feel even greater sorrow at the prospect of his departure than would May. She was older too, and the “Spring” which in early youth enables a grief-stricken girl to throw off the burden of her woes, is weakened at least, if not broken past repair in the organisation of a woman whose misfortune it is to have outlived Hope. But it was not alone his repugnance to witnessing the signs of suffering on his kind friend’s face which rendered the very memory of the “Shanty” a source of annoyance and of deep remorse to Guy. His debt to Richard Denham (although it had been, by reason of the weekly rent paid during Mrs Durant’s occupancy of that gentleman’s house, diminished by one

half) amounted to at least two hundred pounds. It was his only debt, so called, of *honour*, and as such it weighed terribly upon his mind. Not in like fashion, I regret to say, did this as yet unrepentant prodigal reflect upon the unpaid tradesmen's bills, whose name was Legion, which he would leave behind him. I am indeed of opinion, painful as to me, his historian, is the expression of this opinion, that Guy Leicester, in common with many another military as well as *civil* spendthrift, had come to look upon the tradesmen, whom he in fact defrauded, as his natural enemies. They bored him to death, "the brutes," by their incessant and impertinent demands for payment, and, this being the case, the notion of their approaching discomfiture was not for him

without its agreeable side. But, as I before said, a debt of honour—a debt, moreover, to a *soi-disant* friend of whose hospitalities he had partaken, and whose wife (ah! there the shoe pinched hardest, for Leycester could not conceal from himself the painful truth that Dame Rumour had, and that not without some excuse for her intervention, coupled his name calumniously with that of Richard Denham's still handsome *souffre-douleur*)—was a very different affair. He little imagined, when he hit upon what he considered to be an ingenious device for paying off a portion of his debt to the husband, that he had, by giving presents of jewellery to the wife, given a handle to the scandal-mongers to filch away her hitherto stainless reputation. It was only lately that this disastrous effect of his evil-doing

had become known to him, and his deep regret in that he had been the occasion to her of so cruel and unjust a wrong, troubled his awakening conscience not a little. It was, he told himself, his first duty, before the news of his exchange should reach her from other quarters, to inform her of his approaching departure, and pour out to her, in deep contrition, his knowledge of the injury which his sin had wrought her.

To see Gertrude Denham without an hour's delay became under these circumstances his most ardent wish, and he accordingly wrote an urgent appeal to the Colonel for permission to leave temporarily and on parole the barrack-room to which he had been consigned. That there was a lady in the case he did not hesitate to hint, and that being a

plea which the Chief was, as Guy well knew, the last man living to disregard, the leave applied for was without hesitation granted.

As he wended his way towards the "Shanty," Guy, for the first time in his life, experienced that loathing of his own acts which a man who has a heart to feel can hardly fail to experience when he has by his own faults and follies brought sorrow and trouble upon another. There is no greater fallacy than that which lurks in the saying that a man who is extravagant and devoid of principle is no one's enemy but his own. For the sins of such an one (a popular member of society, you may be sure, or such an excuse would not be pleaded in his behalf) are for a surety often visited

on the guiltless; and Guy Leycester, as he dwelt in thought upon his own powerlessness to remedy the mischief he had wrought, felt, at his interview with the woman whose already sorrowful life he had succeeded in embittering, his courage to impart to her an added grief will-nigh desert him.

On arriving at the "Shanty," the room into which he was shown, and where he awaited the mistress of the house, was tenantless, and for a few minutes he remained standing with his back to the door, and gazing, lost in moody thought, from the open window. How should he address her? How break to her the tidings that her only friend (for, alas! not a few of those of her own sex had forsaken her) would soon leave her in her worse than desolate life,

unprotected and forlorn? As he was thus painfully ruminating on the situation, Gertrude, with the smile with which she always greeted his presence, entered the room, and after they had shaken hands, Guy could imagine no better conversational opening than the following question:—

“Have you heard the strange story, in which I have unfortunately got myself mixed up, about Lady Gregorie’s diamonds? A thousand pounds’ worth of jewels have been stolen, it is said, from the house. The Colonel saw the Inspector of Police about it at once, but those stupid detectives never hit the right nail on the head, and they insisted that the robbery must have been effected through the connivance of a servant in the house. But now, tell

me, what have you heard? or have you been told anything about the matter?"

"Indeed, No," was the reply, spoken in the slightly-depressed tone which a long course of worry and anxiety had rendered almost habitual to the speaker, and to which Guy had become accustomed. "My life is now a very solitary one, for I have but few visitors; and as during the past week Mr Denham has been absent from home, there has been no one to inform me of what is going on. I am very sorry though, for what you tell me. Poor Lady Gregorie! I hope her jewels will be recovered. But have the police no clue, — no suspicion as to who the thief may be?"

"Well, yes. They have been clever

enough to suggest Lady Gregorie's maid, for no other reason than because she is a foreigner. Sir Wilfred takes it very quietly, but Lady G. seems very much worried. I met her driving just now with Miss Vidal, who looked as jolly as if someone had presented her with a *parure* of brilliants. In my opinion, the fair Em is a decidedly objectionable young person."

"She did not strike me as being very nice," Mrs Denham rejoins. "But what a charming girl Miss Durant is. I wonder if it is true that she and Captain Elphinstone are engaged."

"True as gospel, and if marriages ever do turn out well, theirs promises to do so. The Colonel won't be particularly pleased. He hates fellows in the regiment marrying, and if I were

not thinking of a change myself, I should be rather of his opinion."

He is sitting in front of her, and leaning on the sword which is between his knees. His tall figure is bending forward, and his eyes are fixed upon the carpet. Well he knows that the soft-hearted woman to whom his last ominously - sounding words have been said, will be terribly startled by the news, however vague, which they suggest; nor is he deceived in his expectation, for Gertrude, in a tone which sufficiently betrays her alarm, exclaims,—

"A change! What are you speaking of? Are you tired of your old regiment? Surely you are not thinking of deserting your many friends?"

"Not until I have got rid of my one enemy," Guy, speaking half to himself,

says calmly; but Gertrude, whose fears have in some vague and indescribable, but doubtless truly feminine fashion, become excited, perceives something in his tone which fills her with forebodings, and, great as is her hidden desire to discover what is passing in his mind, she, although shrinking from asking for an explanation of his mysterious words, repeats still more eagerly than before her previous question.

“Tell me, I entreat of you, what is the change you are meditating? You do not know, dear Guy — how should you, a brave, independent man — understand what the suspense will be to me.”

“How seriously you take it,” Guy, with rather a forced laugh, rejoins. “What would you say now if I were thinking

of enjoying a little sport with the big game in Africa?"

"Ah!" cried Mrs Denham, and there was in her voice a ring of such passionate pain that its memory clung to Guy in after days like a reproach, "I see it all! I understand what you mean! You are going to join the army in the Soudan! You—"

"How hastily you women jump at conclusions," Guy, in some dismay at sight of her agitation, exclaims. And then, like the moral coward which in truth he is, he adds cheerily,—“The expected, as we all know, rarely comes to pass, and I confess that just at present I see no other way of escape from my friends, the Jews, than exchange into a red regiment. Of course I should hate it; but I have not come to bother you with

my affairs. At least" (correcting himself), "not with those with which you are unconnected. As you have always known of that miserable debt of mine to Denham, I can speak of it to you, and can tell you that at this moment, when, God knows, I am bothered to death by those confounded Jews, and a hundred other things besides, the harm which, owing to that wretched debt, I have done to you is what annoys and vexes me the most. When I bought you those trifling presents—"

"Oh, Guy," interrupted Gertrude hurriedly, "you must not — indeed you must not, call them presents. They belong, do not be angry with me, dear, for saying this, to the jeweller of whom you ordered them. There are times, and this is one of them, when the distinction

between Right and Wrong strikes one as so very clearly marked, that to be silent regarding them is almost impossible. I have been made to appear in public with what I consider the badges of shame upon my neck and arms ; and since I have been told that the fact of their having been given to me by you has been noised abroad, I have understood—God help me ! why I have been, by my female acquaintances, cruelly shunned, and treated as though I were a sinner.”

The words had come tremblingly from her pallid lips, and when she had ceased speaking, she covers her face with her hands, and allows the tears which she had striven to repress, to fall unnoticed from between her fingers.

The sight of her emotion, together with his own consciousness of being

utterly unable to protect and aid her, fills Guy's breast with the most poignant sensations of remorse, and the only relief to his wrathful and self-reproachful feelings which he finds available, is the lavishing of hard words against the "accursed" female gossips and slanderers who had dared to throw stones at a woman so pure and blameless as is the object of their attacks.

"But you shall not be left to their tender mercies," he wound up by saying. "There are some good and true women left, thank God! in the world, and when the truth becomes known to them—"

"But, dear Guy, it cannot—must not be known," put in Mrs Denham sadly. "Think of the disgrace (forgive me for the word) which the knowledge of it

would entail on all concerned. *Your* thoughtless action might be condoned, for to you, and such as you, many things are forgiven; but my husband is not like you, popular and well-considered. He would sink lower than ever in public estimation, if the world were to know in what manner a portion of your debt to him was paid. No, no, dear Guy, I cannot allow your generous wish to champion me, to lead you possibly into further trouble. I must accept my punishment for the weakness with which I yielded to my husband's commands, and then— Well, perhaps I was worse than weak, for I was aware how heavily your debt to him weighed upon your mind, and I was glad of the opportunity which was afforded me of making things more easy to you."

“I know; you have always been so kind and good; and if you, dear friend, will allow me, in one single instance only, to divulge the entire truth, you would take, in some measure, the burden of having injured you from my mind. Mrs Durant is the most generous-hearted and the most charitable of women, and her daughter Helen, who is so soon to marry Elphinstone, is Lady Gregorie’s friend, and with them on your side you may laugh to scorn the spiteful scandal-mongers who have presumed to look askance at you. Tell me, then, whether I may enlist these kindly women in your cause? May I say—”

“Dear Guy,” interrupted Mrs Denham, “you must not think me ungrateful if I remind you that the advocacy of a

man, especially of one who like yourself has—but I need not particularise,” she, with her winning smile, continued, “only I wish to say that a woman’s good name, when it has been filched away—”

“Cannot be restored to her through the efforts of the man to whom she has given the only good advice that it has ever been his lot to listen to! The man, who, when he had ceased to have faith either in God or women, found, since she became his friend, his belief in both restored—can *his* testimony be of no avail with such listeners as Mrs Durant and Lady Gregorie to induce the world to know you as you are, and to hold you in as much high and true respect as I myself do?”

He spoke warmly, tenderly even, but

his words, kind as they were, fell coldly on Gertrude's ear. When a woman is yearning for love, when her whole soul is going out in passionate longing towards the man whose hand is on her arm, and whose eyes are looking pleadingly into hers, it is cruel mockery to speak to her of "high respect." In her heart she had asked for bread (*id est*—love), which to her was truly as the staff of life, and she had been given instead—a stone!

The sigh which preluded this poor woman's answer to Guy's appeal, was one which bespoke, as did indeed her words, an utter weariness of life.

"As you will," she said. "To me it matters little what the world says of one so insignificant as I am. Still, the friendship of so good, so kind a woman

as you describe Mrs Durant to be, is a boon not to be despised, and—but we have talked enough about my unworthy self, tell me now about your own plans. You spoke of change, but if that change means leaving Broadmere, you cannot expect me to be glad of it. This is selfishness on my part, I own, but you who have seen enough of my most unhappy home, will not be too hard upon me. I have so few friends, so very few who are so kind as to sympathise with me in the trials of my daily life.”

It has been said that Guy Leycester was a moral coward, and his response to Mrs Denham’s piteous exordium proves the correctness of the accusation. He could not screw up his courage to the point of announcing to Mrs Denham the fact that his speedy departure for the Soudan

was, humanly speaking, a *fait accompli*. As would have been the case with many self-indulgent persons, he dreaded the effect upon his own nerves which the sight of her sorrow, and possibly her tears, were calculated to produce. By sparing *her* the shock of an abrupt disclosure of the worst, discomfort to *his* feelings would be in a great measure avoided, and it was with this end in view that he said,—

“The change I spoke of as possible, is one which would take me out of the way of my confounded duns, and at the same time enable me to do what little I can in aid of the courageous soldier Gordon, who has been left so long by the Government to his fate. His cause is indeed a sacred one,” he, keeping his eyes averted from his com

panion, continues, "and so, all things considered, I wrote some little time ago to the Horse Guards, offering myself as a volunteer. If the answer should be a favourable one"—and here his speech and manner appear confused, whilst his hands are actively employed in the apparently uncalled-for labour of bur-nishing the hilt of his sword—"you shall be told of it at once. And you will wish me God speed, will you not, dear friend, and tell me that you think I am only, as an English soldier, going to do my duty?"

She can make no answer to his incoherent questions, for, seeing that she has, for the time being, forgotten alike the rules of conventionality and the concealment of her own passionate love for Guy, which she has so long and so successfully prac-

tised. The sight of her uncontrolled and evidently uncontrollable sorrow is infinitely distressing to the man who is deceiving her. In the hope of checking the flow of her tears, he whispers to her the cruelly deluding words,—

“After all, my services may not be accepted; but to-morrow the official reply must come, and I will lose no time in telling you the result.”

With this crumb of comfort,—this feeble straw of hope on which to cling, the man, who, excepting to a woman, would sooner die than give utterance to a falsehood, leaves the frail creature who is weak enough to worship him, a prey to fears which her reason is powerless to subdue. As the door closes upon a form which, in her eyes, is the perfection of manly symmetry and strength, imagina-

tion, that integrant portion of most human idiosyncrasies, and one which plays, whether for good or evil, for many of us an important part, quickly commences, in the case of Gertrude Denham, its tormenting work. She pictures to herself the horrors of a battle-field, a battle-field in which Guy is at one moment fighting for dear life amongst the brave and fanatical foe whose spears are levelled against the dear one's throat, whilst in a second the scene changes, and he is lying stark and cold upon the ground, with unclosed eyes staring upwards to the tropic sky, and with blood, which by cruel Death has been congealed, stiffening the uniform in which he had gone so bravely to his doom.

She seems to know by intuition, not that he has deceived her, in her eyes he

is too noble of nature to play a trickster's part—but that the request which he has made to the authorities will be granted, and that she will be left, as, in her despair, she deems it, alone. Truly a miserable being is this blameless woman to whom strength to resist the assaults of fierce temptation had been given, but who has failed to find in her virtue its promised reward!





CHAPTER XI.

SANS ADIEU.

IT was with a very lowering brow, and a mind burdened with annoyance and care, that Sir Wilfred Gregorie awaited in his own private sanctum the advent of Guy Leicester, to whom he had a second time that day despatched a messenger requiring his attendance. The information obtained from Miss Vidal left no doubt on the Colonel's mind in regard to the identity of Major Brereton with the purloiner of the diamonds. The

discovery was not, in a public point of view, without its satisfactory side, but in so far as Sir Wilfred was concerned, it contained elements not only of worry but of alarm. He had not been able, frank and outspoken as had been, to all appearance, Miss Vidal's volunteered confession, to entirely disconnect his wife from what he did not hesitate to call that "damnably shady diamond business." He, being a man of some experience in such matters, had his own ideas as regarded not only women's proclivities but their histrionic powers; and although he had hitherto, as the reader is already aware, regarded Florence as the one woman in a thousand who could be trusted, he had not, I repeat, been able to entirely divest himself, in her case, of doubt.

The police authorities were, as he well knew, actively employed in the search after a clue by means of which the guilty man might be brought to justice. Sir Wilfred, who would from the beginning have gladly allowed the affair to slide, was now more than ever desirous that public suspicion should not be directed towards Brereton. On Lady Gregorie's account, and because of his fear that her name might be ever so slightly alluded to in connection with the theft, he felt extreme reluctance to put a summary stop to the investigations which were in progress. Deductions, the results of which it was terrible to contemplate, might, he feared, be drawn from his sudden interference with the course of justice. The interview with Guy Leycester which he was

momentarily expecting, would, so hoped the Colonel, throw some light upon this still dark and mysterious subject. In the meantime, intelligence had reached him that Brereton's injuries were proving far less serious than they had at first appeared to be ; and this report did not fail, if only on Leycester's account, to give satisfaction to Sir Wilfred.

“So,” he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness which he was far from feeling, when the prisoner on parole, looking moody, and ill at ease, entered the room, “you will not have to stand your trial for either murder or manslaughter this time. Your very respectable victim is, as you have probably heard, going on as well as can be expected ; but sit down, my dear fellow, and let us talk this wretched business

out. Miss Vidal has denounced him, and, as I believe, with perfect truth, as the rascal who stole the diamonds. Now——”

“My dear Colonel, forgive me for interrupting you!” exclaimed Guy, “but I cannot enter with you into the subject of my altercation with Major Brereton. I have the worst possible opinion of him, it is true——”

“And you, of course, think it certain that there is a woman at the bottom of the business?”

The speaker's eyes were, during this interrogative remark, fixed in somewhat embarrassing fashion on Guy Leycester's handsome face, but the effect produced on the recalcitrant Captain by this proceeding was one which (whilst it confirmed the Colonel's impression that

his companion could, "an' he would," say much) was the reverse of that for which the older man had hoped. A deep flush rose for a moment to Guy's bronzed forehead, as he said, with a quiet smile,—

"I should imagine so, for they are certainly at the bottom of most of the mischief that is done in the world;" and then, having the fear of further questionings before his eyes, he added,—
"And now may I ask you to do me the great kindness of extending my parole till to-morrow?"

"Certainly, my dear Leycester, and I only wish that this farce of a Court-martial could be dispensed with. The idea of a man being tried for punching the head of such a scoundrel as this Brereton! I wish to Heaven that he

had never thought of exchanging into the Rifles;" and as he gave voice to this aspiration, the cloud which had gathered there grew darker on the Colonel's brow.

"I am due at Ivy Combe to-day," Guy said, "for I have not yet told them—by the way, I ought to have mentioned this first to you, Colonel—that I had an answer this morning to my application for an exchange, and I must make immediate preparations for departure."

"Really? Well, I wish you joy, and, moreover, I have little doubt now that, under all the circumstances, the Court-martial will be cancelled."

"For which mercy I shall cry 'Oh, be joyful!' but as I wish to see the Durants and Elphinstone before the

exchange gets wind, perhaps you will allow me to take my leave?"

This request, however, the Colonel did not immediately accede to. He was essentially a man of action, and, partly, perhaps, from a tolerably long habit of command, suspense of any kind was to him an almost unendurable annoyance. His temper also was an irascible one, and the affair of the diamond robbery, which had now been for some time on the *tapis*, had, to a greater degree than he was himself aware, irritated and troubled him. The bare idea that through her friendship with Miss Vidal, and through that alone, the name of his wife might, in connection with that of Brereton, get noised abroad, was sufficient to send the hot blood of the gallant soldier

at boiling point through his veins. And then—alas! for the proud man's peace of mind—the evasive reply vouchsafed by Guy was so far from satisfactory to his questioner, that old doubts, and half suspicions would perforce intrude upon the latter's anxious brain.

He, the Colonel, was still gazing with his curiously-penetrating glance into the dark grey eyes of his Captain, the chief's intention being to extract from them, at least, if not from his interlocutor's carefully - padlocked tongue, some of the light of which he was in search. He was leaning back in an apparently careless fashion in his arm-chair, but his tones were slow and decisive as he said,—

“I may as well tell you that Miss

Vidal did not limit her confidence to the accusation which she brought against Major Brereton, but that she frankly and without reserve denounced herself as *the* woman to screen whose reputation the bribe of the jewels was offered to, or demanded by (she did not say which), the scoundrel by whom they were appropriated. And now," continued the Colonel, whose eyes had not for a single second been diverted from Guy's somewhat troubled countenance, "will you tell me, on your honour, and as man to man, whether you believe that this young woman spoke the truth?"

Thus appealed to, Guy found it utterly impossible to do otherwise than answer as his conscience dictated. He had already, during this short inter-

view, began to fear that suspicion regarding Lady Gregorie's possible share in the jewel transaction had already entered into the Colonel's mind, and, if that were the case, his Chief was not the kind of man (a peculiarity of which Guy was well aware) to allow such a suspicion to slide, without due investigation, away. His reply was, therefore, brief and to the point. He did not, he confessed, put any faith in Miss Vidal's declaration; and having so said, and no response having followed on his statement, he felt himself at liberty to take his leave.

"Remember me, will you, to Mrs Durant and her daughters," said the Colonel, as the men shook hands. "Lady Gregorie was talking of calling on them to-day, but I think that

this detestable business has put the idea out of her head."

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It was with an unmistakable sense of relief that Guy found himself safe from the dangers of any further examination. His nature was as chivalrous as it was impulsive, nevertheless, more than once, as he took his rapid way to the cottage, he was troubled with a passing regret in that he had taken upon his shoulders the duty of championing Lady Gregorie's wrongs. These reflections were, however, but of short duration, for other and far deeper cares were occupying his mind and heart. There loomed before him the terrible necessity of imparting to the girl he loved the change which by his own act was about to be effected in his fortunes. He was not mistaken in his

belief that the blow would be to this tender-hearted, inexperienced girl a very heavy one. She had—under the influence of her mother's tenderness, her mother's authority, and pleadings—spoken brave words, and declared her determination to follow, unmoved by his entreaties, the path of duty; but this passing triumph of filial affection over the passionate yearnings of a heart which had throbbed responsive to a lover's kiss, could not, as Guy felt well assured, continue. Nor did he entertain any fear that he would be denied an interview with his sweetheart. He was far from feeling in the submissive mood which had induced him, on the occasion of his last visit, to meet Mrs Durant's reproaches in a chastened spirit; on the contrary, he felt equal to any emergency, and not even young

Lochinvar himself was better inclined or fit than he to do battle for his lady love.

“Anyone at home?” he asked of the trim parlour-maid who, on hearing his ring, opened the door of Ivy Cottage to the visitor.

“Yes, sir, Miss May is in the drawing-room, but Mrs Durant has walked to the village, and Miss Helen and the Cap’in are away a-horseback somewhere.”

“All right. You needn’t show me in,” said Guy, and then, three strides (Love’s “bower” being on the ground floor) brought him into the presence of the worshipped one.

“My darling!” he cried. “Thank God you are alone;” and then, taking time by the forelock, for Mrs Durant’s thrice-

blessed absence might not be of long duration, he kissed again and again the sweet, blushing face, which certainly did not turn aside from his caresses.

“Darling child! My own angel!” he murmured between each lengthened pressure of his lips to hers, “tell me that you are glad to have me with you once again. I have so much to say to you,—to ask of you—”

“Is it that I will be true to you?—will love you always, let who will tell me to forget you? Oh, Guy, will you ever forgive me for what I said to you? I thought, but it isn’t true, that I could bear to part with you; but I cannot— No, I *cannot*! If you were to leave me, or to care for anyone but me, I hope that I should die;” and as she spoke, she pressed with such clinging

trustfulness her dainty head to his broad breast, that Guy, sweet although it was to feel himself so loved, could almost have found it in his heart to wish, so greatly did he shrink from the ordeal that was before him, that his eyes had never rested on the girl whose heart he was about, with cruel words, to stab.

“My poor little girl,” he said tenderly, whilst he stroked with protecting fondness the bright golden head which rested in lovely disarray against his heart, “you care for me too much. I am not worthy of such love as yours, for I have deceived you, dear one. I have kept from you a secret which you ought to have earlier learned, and now I am afraid—”

“Afraid!” repeated the girl scornfully, as with a sudden movement she lifted her head from its resting-place. “You

afraid!" and she laughed ironically. "I believe that you fear nothing in life or—or death, except to tell me that you have been false to me. It is, I think, because you are so brave that I first began to love you, so do not—or rather *do* tell me why you said that you were afraid, and then stopped so quickly as if—as if it were almost true."

"And it is true, my dear one,—true that I, who would gladly make your life all sunshine, am forced to grieve you. For we must part, my May-blossom. Only for a time though," he added quickly; "so do not look, my darling, so like a little wounded dove. I am going for a short while to a place where I hope to obtain promotion and honours; and then, perhaps — and oh, my sweet one, it takes my breath away even to think of

such happiness!—I may be allowed to hope that we shall not always be kept apart.”

May had listened in agitated silence to the concluding portion of this short but not especially lucid harangue; it is, however, doubtful whether any portion of it, with the exception of that which announced the dismal fact that she and her lover must of necessity be torn asunder, came clearly home to her understanding. It was with a sensation akin to despair, therefore, that she in broken sentences entreated to be told more. And it was with eyes brimming over with tears that she implored poor harassed Guy to promise, if indeed he loved her, that he would not be many days away.

“The hours seem so long without you, dear,” she said, as with her slender fingers

she lovingly stroked the hand that rested on its owner's sword hilt. "And, oh, I have been so frightened! Ever since mother spoke to you, and to me too, about our not caring for each other any more, I have been so unhappy! But you will care, won't you, dear? and you will not let them send you a long way off, so that you may forget to think of me? Oh, mother is very cruel! She means to be kind, but if she makes you leave me, she will break my heart."

The child's pitiful appeals, as they fell brokenly from her quivering lips, went straight to Guy's Leicester's heart. The trial which his darling was fated to undergo was one for which she was totally unprepared, and for a few moments, the lover by whose hand the blow was to be dealt her, fairly lost the nerve

which was requisite for the task. At last, with his arm round her slender waist, and with her fair head pillowed on his breast, he whispered,—

“My sweet one, you must not think that your mother is being unkind to you. It is only I that you must blame. Nay, listen to me, whilst I tell you, darling, how this thing has happened. You know—for I have kept none of my worries from you—that I am one of the poorest beggars under the sun. My debts, too, are more in number than the hairs of my head, so some time ago—it was before I loved you, you may be sure of that, my darling—I got so disgusted with the confounded harpies who beset me, that I applied to the Horse-Guards for permission to exchange into another regiment.”

“My poor Guy, how dreadful for you, who dislike the red colour so much.”

“Exactly; I am a perfect mad bull in that respect, but what was a fellow to do? Well, the answer was long in coming, but,” drawing a deep breath, “I got it this morning, and in less than a week I shall have to go.”

“But where to? Oh, Guy, tell me everything. Do not keep me in suspense. Is it—I will try to be brave, indeed I will—to Egypt? and will you be away very long?”

Poor child! she was striving her utmost to keep back her tears; and to Guy there was something intensely touching in her utter ignorance of the fact that he was about to depart on a distant service, where dangers of various kinds awaited him. She was

only seventeen, and in some respects was even younger than her years, for Mrs Durant had never permitted her girls to indulge in a promiscuous reading of the daily papers, and consequently May was as ignorant of the minor details of war and politics, as she was behindhand in the gossip and scandal of the day. That there had been fighting in Egypt she was aware, and she was also familiar with the fact that the gallant soldier Gordon was shut up at a place called Khartoum, to which he had gone with the hope of doing good; but of the little army of martyrs which was on its hard-fought way to rescue him, and of the fierce struggles against disease and battle which it was that little army's lot to wage, May entertained but a

vague and indistinct idea. Mrs Durant strongly objected, as regarded the mental aliment of young people, to anything approaching to sensation or excitement. All Illustrated description, whether realistic or drawn from the imagination, of a fiercely - contested battle-field, and of the "immense slaughter" (generally with much national pride announced) of a naked and comparatively defenceless foe, were therefore by Mrs Durant carefully kept from the eyes of her young daughters ; and thus it chanced that May's conceptions of the perils which by going, as she called it, to Africa, her sweetheart might possibly incur, differed very widely from the reality.

That this was the case, was a source of much self-congratulation to Guy. It

enabled him to avoid altogether any allusion to the Soudan, whilst he could, with an apparently light heart, speak of his own coming departure as though it were a start on a pleasure trip, from which he would be certain to return in greatly improved circumstances, to the darling girl whom he was forced to leave behind him. These rose-coloured anticipations were not unfrequently, as the reader will easily believe, interrupted after a fashion which brought so bright a carnation to May's usually white rose complexion, so that, when Mrs Durant, after the lapse of an hour, stepped noiselessly through the open window into the presence of the lovers, she saw good reason to wish that she had remained at home.

“Now, mother dear, you must not

scold us!" exclaimed May, as she hastily sprang from Guy's encircling arm. "He is going away for a long time, and I thought that you would not mind our talking once more, together."

"Is this true, Captain Leycester?" asked Mrs Durant gravely; and then, without waiting for the young man's answer, and ignoring altogether his offered hand, she requested her daughter to leave her alone with her unwelcome visitor.

May for a moment both looked, and felt rebellious; but there was an expression—so new as to be almost startling—on her mother's gentle face, that compelled the unwilling girl to obedience, and with a loving, lingering look at her sweetheart, she left the room. Then Guy, feeling shamefaced and humbled in presence of the widowed mother whose trust

he had betrayed, opened out to her his half-despairing heart. He told her that, dreading the sight of May's sorrow and alarm, he had concealed from her the fact that he was bound in all haste for the seat of war, whence he might never—he reminded her—return.

“But if I do—if I should gain promotion, and come back a wiser and a better man than is the heavily-burdened one who has come to say farewell to you to-day, will you be merciful, and promise that May shall be my wife one day.”

His voice — always, to women, gentle and caressing—took in its pleadings so touching a tone, that Mrs Durant, with whom he had always been a favourite, forgave him in her heart, upon the spot. More *au courant*, too, than was her daughter of what was going on in the

world, the mere mention of the word Soudan was sufficient to daunt her spirit with a sense of fear; and the feeling that she might never see his face again, rendered her, towards this attractive sinner, very merciful, although that so it was, she prudently abstained from giving voice.

“I am glad,” she said, “that you have kept from May the knowledge of what would, I fear, render her for a time, very unhappy. She is so young, that we may hope she will not fret long after your departure; but should she do so, and if, on your return, you should be of the same mind—”

“Oh, Mrs Durant!” cried Guy impetuously, “can you doubt it? If you could only look into my heart, and see what May is to me, you would

never think that I could forget her. Why, if I ever do any good with my life, it is to her and her love that I shall owe it. She is so good—so pure—”

“And also so young and inexperienced, that by a man of honour—for such you, of course, consider yourself to be—her purity and goodness should have been held as sacred gifts; but,” she continued, whilst noting the flush of anger that deepened on Guy Leicester’s cheek, and the impatient tapping of his boot upon the carpet, “we have talked over this before. What is past and done cannot be undone, but the present, and possibly the future, remain to us, and in their course you may, supposing your words to be something more than empty boastings,

make some reparation for the wrong which you have done."

"Try me! only try me—" Guy was eagerly beginning, but with her up-raised hand she stopped him.

"Hush! What I shall require of you is a hard thing, and you had better be silent till you learn its nature. You must not see my child again."

"Not see her! Impossible! Oh, Mrs Durant, do not be so hard!"

"It may seem cruel, but—the future being so uncertain, and the child being so young—can you wonder that my hope and object is that she should forget the past?"

"And have you no compassion,—no feeling for me? Why, May's forgetfulness would simply mean my ruin—body and soul."

“I trust not; and believe me that I do feel for you, and that I forgive you freely for the perhaps irreparable misfortune which you have brought upon my child; but, for her sake, I must save her from what must of necessity be an emotional and trying scene. It will be easy for you, after you have left me to-day, to imagine some valid reason for the avoidance of a farewell interview; or you may lay the blame—where it is due, on me. May will not be angry with her mother long, for hers is a forgiving nature, and she will understand that I have acted in this matter for her good. And now, dear Captain Leycester, pardon me for saying that I think you had better shake hands with me, and go your ways.”

“What! Leave without a hope—for

I hardly expect a promise—that I may win your daughter yet? Dear Mrs Durant, tell me, at least, that you will not take part against me. We may never meet again—”

“Ah, that is it!” the widow, with a cry of mental pain, broke in,—“that is what the child—God help her!—may have to suffer. Ah! how hard life is! And to begin the cruellest of its woes so early, breaks my heart for May.”

“Let us hope,” said Guy bitterly, as, in compliance with Mrs Durant’s request, he rose to go, and held for a moment her cold, shaking hand in his, “that if it should please God, as the parsons say, to cut short in the Soudan the few and evil days of my pilgrimage, the memory of the man who loved her will not haunt your

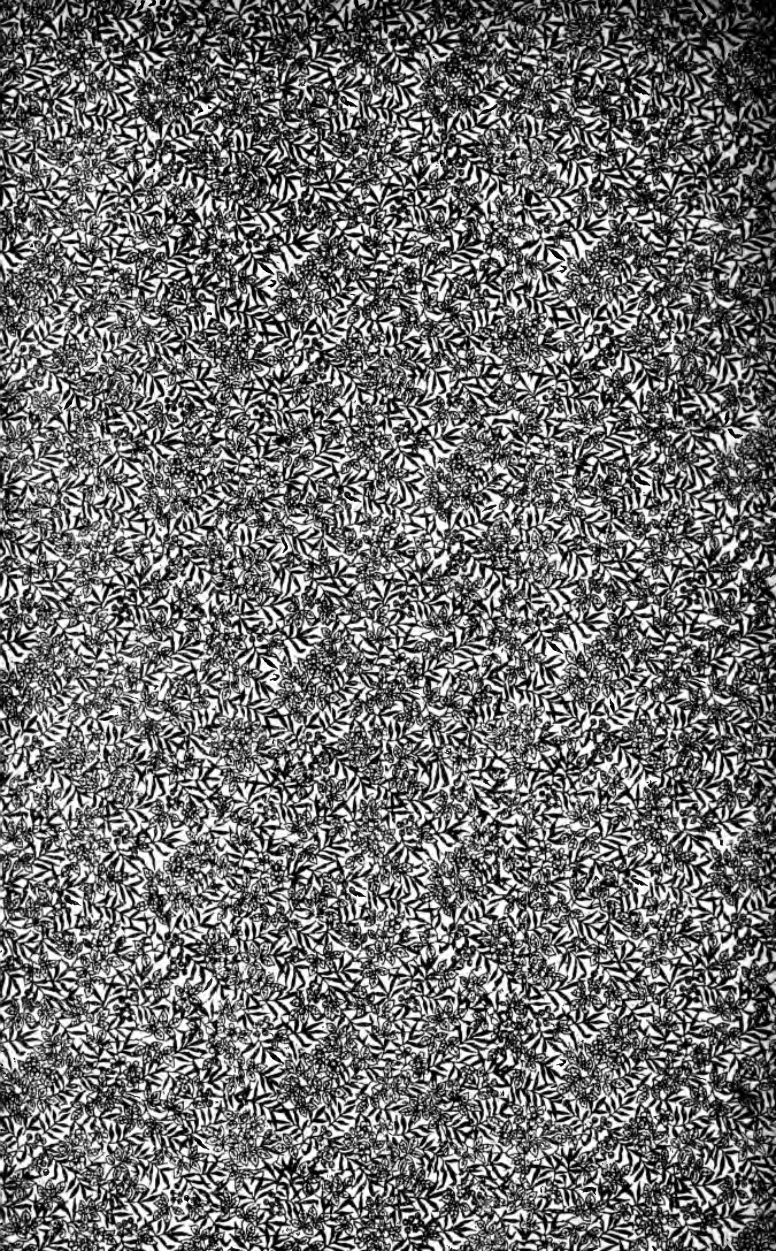
daughter long. She is, as you say, young, and should she shed a tear over my memory, you will be there to warn her that to remember me is a mistake."

They were his last words, and Mrs Durant, as she watched his tall form disappear quickly amongst the trees, grieved inwardly in that she had allowed him to depart un comforted on what would only too probably prove to be an errand of death."

END OF VOL. II.









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